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NAME OF AUTHOR/*NOM DE L'AUTEUR* Allan Kornelsen Dueck

TITLE OF THESIS/*TITRE DE LA THÈSE* Rudy Wiebe as Storyteller : Vision and Art in Wiebe's Fiction

UNIVERSITY/*UNIVERSITÉ* University of Alberta

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED/ *GRADE POUR LEQUEL CETTE THÈSE FUT PRÉSENTÉE* Master of Arts

YEAR THIS DEGREE CONFERRED/*ANNÉE D'OBTENTION DE CE DEGRÉ* Fall 1974

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

RUDY WIEBE AS STORYTELLER: VISION AND ART IN WIEBE'S FICTION

by

(C) ALLAN KORNELSEN DUECK

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT .....ENGLISH.....

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL 1974

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled .....Rudy Wiebe as Storyteller: Vision and Art in Wiebe's Fiction..... submitted by .....Allan Kornelsen Dueck..... in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of .....Arts.....

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ABSTRACT

Chapter I surveys Rudy Wiebe's literary productivity and the critical study of his work to the present. It also outlines the thesis's basic argument.

Chapter II defines Wiebe as a storyteller of the sort Walter Benjamin has described. Although the exchanging of experience by telling stories has become increasingly uncommon in today's scientific world, Wiebe continues to value story as shared experience. His stories arise from the experience of people who have not yet distanced themselves from life by intellectualizing it, but retain contact with its elemental realities such as joy, hatred, love, or death. Most of the characters in Wiebe's fiction--Mennonite, Eskimo, or Indian--remain close to the land and feel its rhythms. The deep religious sensibility that is characteristic of primitive peoples infuses the characters in Wiebe's fiction.

Chapter III focuses upon Wiebe's orientation as storyteller towards practical interest and moral counsel. Although his primary aim is to create good stories, Wiebe believes that the best stories not only entertain people, but also illuminate life. Wiebe's own profoundly religious sensibility, his Christian world view, evinces itself in his fiction on one hand as criticism of people as they are, and on the other as a vision of what they might be.

Chapter IV argues that the strong sense of the past that per-

neates Wiebe's fiction marks him as a storyteller. Believing that historical "facts" can be variously interpreted, Wiebe from his Christian perspective reinterprets--in his Mennonite fiction--the "facts" of Russian Mennonite history and--in his Indian fiction--the "facts" of Western Canadian history. Because as a Christian Wiebe sees history as meaningful, his historical fiction is not an antiquarian study, but an exploration of how people's origins make them who they are today. Fundamentally Wiebe's stories from the past are merely stories--stories that both entertain and tell the human story in history.

Chapter V contends that in Wiebe's fiction sometimes the Christian vision overshadows the art so as to make the story ineffective. Wiebe's dialogue and characterization are at times, especially in his early fiction, undermined by didacticism. Yet, Wiebe has a remarkable capacity to get into the minds of his characters. If his dialogue is often weak, Wiebe in his sometimes highly poetic prose and his effective use of metaphor and symbol emerges as a gifted storyteller.

Chapter VI briefly recapitulates the thesis.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rudy Wiebe today is one of the leading creative writers in Canada. Although he has not been prolific, Wiebe has, since he seriously began writing during the mid-fifties, published several poems, many short stories, and four novels. The few of Wiebe's poems that are accessible are ones he wrote during the fifties--"New Year's Eve in the Rockies" (1956),[1] "Fall Sunday in Hyde Park" (1958),[2] "Muffled Return" (1958),[3] and "Voices" (1959).[4] These poems are interesting primarily for what they indicate about Wiebe's early poetic aspirations, and about his facility with language. What few people know is that Wiebe is an accomplished short-story writer. He has published many excerpts from his novels as short stories--such as "Oolulik" (1966, 1970),[5] "The Well" (1967, 1968, 1970),[6] and "Buffalo Run" (1973)[7]--either before or after the novels were published. In addition to these, Wiebe has also published numerous independent short stories--such as "Tudor King" (1964),[8] "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" (1970, 1972),[9] and "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" (1971, 1972).[10] That some of Wiebe's stories are brilliant and many portions of his novels work very well as short stories suggests that Wiebe's greatest gift is short-story writing. Of course, Wiebe is best-known for his novels--Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962, 1972),[11] First and Vital Candle (1966),[12] The Blue Mountains of China (1970),[13]

and The Temptations of Big Bear (1973).[14] The first and third deal with Mennonite themes, the second with an individual's quest for religious faith, and the fourth with Indian experience.

Despite Wiebe's considerable literary productivity, serious critical attention has been disappointingly meager. Wiebe's first two novels were not widely reviewed, and reviewers generally failed to get beyond the narrowly Mennonite and Christian themes to the artistic stuff of the novels. One of the few valuable pieces of criticism from the early period is Elmer F. Suderman's perceptive article, "Universal Values in Rudy Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many."[15] Since the publication of Blue Mountains of China in 1970, however, Wiebe has begun to receive more critical attention. Daniel W. Doerksen's review of Blue Mountains of China in Fiddlehead[16] is a sound piece of criticism as is, despite the non-academic approach, Jim Christy's review of the novel in Saturday Night.[17] That McClelland and Stewart republished Peace Shall Destroy Many as Number 82 of the New Canadian Library Series in 1972 indicates a new stature for Wiebe as artist. And J. M. Robinson's "Introduction" to that new edition is, though brief, useful.[18] The fact that Wiebe's short stories have during the seventies been published in several short-story anthologies --"Oolulik" in Story-Makers, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" in Fourteen Stories High and in the narrative voice, "Millstone for the Sun's Day" in the narrative voice,[19] and "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" in Stories From Western Canada--also indicates Wiebe's growing stature as artist. Significant criticism is also continuing to appear. Hildegard E. Tiessen recently published one of the first substantial thematic studies of Peace Shall Destroy Many and Blue Mountains of

China--"A Mighty Inner River: 'Peace' in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe."[20] Furthermore, Donald Cameron's interview with Wiebe, "Rudy Wiebe: the Moving Stream Is Perfectly at Rest,"[21] is a sensitive, perceptive study of Wiebe and his work. Temptations of Big Bear, though it has received some effusive reviews,[22] has received little serious critical attention aside from Allan Dueck's review article in Journal of Canadian Fiction.[23] The fact, however, that Wiebe received the Governor General's Award for fiction in 1973 for Temptations of Big Bear assures him a place as one of Canada's foremost novelists. Without doubt, Wiebe's work will during the next years increasingly receive the critical attention it deserves.

Despite this promise, however, the foregoing cursory survey of Wiebe's literary art and of the critical studies of his work reveals how disappointingly little attention his art has received. This study attempts to give Wiebe's work serious critical consideration. Although a study such as this one cannot hope to be exhaustive, it seeks to lift out the major emphases, and the weaknesses and strengths of Wiebe's art.

In some important ways, Rudy Wiebe is unique among Canadian literary artists today. Walter Benjamin's critical study of Nikolai Leskov as storyteller[24] provides an apt framework against which to view Wiebe's art. Benjamin argues that telling stories has become uncommon today because exchanging experience orally has become virtually obsolete in the contemporary scientific world (pp. 83-84). Wiebe's stories and his novels, which in terms of Benjamin's categories are stories too, have their bases in rural people with oral traditions--especially Mennonites and Indians--who have not distanced themselves from life by intellectualizing it, but retain

elemental contact with basic human experiences such as dying, tilling the soil, and bearing children. Wiebe in his fiction writes not about contemporary urban experience, but about primitive peoples who remain close to the land's rhythms and retain a deep religious sensibility. W. H. New remarks perceptively that exploring the metaphysical in a culture based upon scientific empiricism is difficult.[25] And certainly, as Donald Cameron suggests, Wiebe is "almost the only serious Christian novelist working in this country now" ("Stream," p. 156).

Benjamin notes further that a storyteller like Leskov has moral counsel for his readers (pp. 86-87, 108). But in today's world in which people are isolated from each other, from themselves, and from God, the possibility of giving moral counsel is remote. In Benjamin's terminology, "'having counsel' is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring . . . because the communicability of experience is decreasing" (p. 86). Wiebe's fiction remains profoundly moral and religious. From his Christian perspective Wiebe criticizes people as they are, but also presents a vision of what they might be.

According to Benjamin, one of the storyteller's favorite subjects is the "lore of the past" (p. 85). But in contrast to the historian who seeks to explain historical events, the storyteller --or chronicler--displays these happenings as "models of the course of the world" ("Storyteller," p. 96). Wiebe's strongly Christian world view largely explains his historical outlook, for Christianity is one of the most historical of religions. In that he reinterprets the historical "facts" of Russian Mennonite history in his Mennonite fiction and the "facts" of Western Canadian history in his Indian

fiction, Wiebe is an historian: he explains and interprets history. More fundamentally, however, he is a chronicler, because he explores not the broad historical panorama of cause and effect, but the specific experience of individuals in history. By telling the human story in history, Wiebe displays historical events as "models of the course of the world."

Benjamin notes that, despite the centrality of moral counsel in story, "half the art of storytelling [is] to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (p. 89). In his early fiction Wiebe is sometimes too overtly didactic to be entirely successful; dialogue and characterization of minor characters especially suffer. Yet, Wiebe has an empathy for what really counts with most people--the elemental facts of life and death, unfaith and faith. Particularly in his often poetic use of language, and evocative use of metaphor and symbol Wiebe transcends the didactic to achieve the amplitude of the storyteller.

This study, therefore, examines Rudy Wiebe's art with particular reference to his interest in people still close to the land and to religious belief, his orientation towards moral counsel, his using historical materials as the stuff of stories, and his craftsmanship as a storyteller.

CHAPTER II

WIEBE AS STORYTELLER

Story as Shared Experience

In terms of his own views of art and the nature of human experience, and of the practice in his fiction, Rudy Wiebe is a storyteller. The distinctive aspect of storytelling, according to Walter Benjamin, is the exchanging of experience. Story has its basis, therefore, in the oral tradition, and this is what distinguishes it most from the modern novel ("Storyteller," pp. 83-84). Benjamin argues that the "storyteller takes what he tells from experience--his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself" (p. 87). If the unique aspect of technological man is his distancing himself from his experience by intellectualizing it, then the storyteller is an archaic phenomenon because he believes in the immediacy and value of experience.

In Rudy Wiebe's view, the telling of stories is basic to human interaction. They are a way of exchanging experience, for Wiebe says that "stories are always specific; they deal with this particular thing that happened there, then, to me or Jane or Harry. They tell us of the uniqueness of human experience, the strangeness, the newness, and insodoing help us build in others and ourselves

the particular awareness of our selves."[1] The impulse to make story derives, Wiebe theorizes, from man's enjoyment of shaping into symbol and pattern the experiences of life.[2] Broadly, therefore, Wiebe considers storytelling a basic impulse in all people everywhere. Yet, he recognizes that Western man has largely forgotten what primitive peoples have always known: "That human beings must and do live as much by rhythm and symbol as by the tangible things that surround them."[3] From Western scientific man's rational point of view story is useless, but from primitive people's experiential point of view story is a vital part of being human ("Songs," 57).

As the festival songs of the Canadian Eskimo are the oral exchanging of experience ("Songs," 60), so many of Wiebe's stories have their root in oral tradition.[4] Many of the stories dealing with the Russian Mennonite experience in Blue Mountains of China are built from stories that Wiebe heard from old Mennonites who personally experienced events similar to those in the novel. For example, "Drink Ye All of It," a story about the escape of a whole Mennonite village from Russia into China, is based upon stories such as he heard from an old neighbor in Saskatchewan who "got all his five toes frozen off in that flight over the river . . ." ("Cameron Interview," p. 13). One of Wiebe's most powerful stories, "Oolulik"--which he originally published as a chapter in First and Vital Candle and later as a short story--grew out of a story that Duncan Pryde told Wiebe about his Arctic experiences ("Cameron Interview," pp. 12-13). In preparation for writing Temptations of Big Bear Wiebe not only researched the historical records in the archives, but personally interviewed some of the oldest people who were still alive and

remembered the events of the Riel uprisings; he spoke with, among others, Duncan McLean, a seven-year-old captive of Big Bear in 1885, and Horsechild's wife.[5] This approach to storytelling confirms Wiebe's respect for story as shared experience.

Many of the narrators in Wiebe's fiction are themselves storytellers of the sort Benjamin describes. Franz Epp in "Black Vulture" (Blue Mountains, pp. 52-71) shares with young John Reimer the story of his trying to smuggle a petition from the Mennonites to the Communist government leaders requesting exit permits from Russia for the Mennonites during the 1920's. Frieda Friesen's four-part "My Life: That's As It Was" (Blue Mountains, pp. 7-11, 42-51, 86-95, 141-50) is a reminiscence of her life experience. In Wiebe's stories with Indian themes, also, many narrators are storytellers. Dan, the narrator in "The Fish Caught in the Battle River,"[6] is an old white man who was one of the early settlers in Saskatchewan. He recollects his experiences during a wagon train run from Swift Current to Battleford in 1885; a sizable Indian band intercepted the group, but soon after capitulated to the whites under Middleton and surrendered the hostages. On the other hand, in "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan,"[7] the narrator is an old Indian who recalls an unsuccessful battle from his youthful days when he was a warrior. Each of these storytellers shares his experience with other people.

Story as Rooted in Primitive Peoples Who Retain Contact with the Elemental Realities of Life

As storyteller Wiebe is interested in primitive peoples who

retain immediate contact with life and with its elemental realities. Walter Benjamin contends that a great storyteller is always "rooted in the people" (p. 101). And Wiebe has written almost all his fiction about Indian, Eskimo, or rural Mennonite experience. E. E. Reimer argues that Wiebe has "a truly admirable feel for the obscure, deep-seated drives that motivate people who have not yet made their life-experience artificial and alien by conceptualizing and intellectualizing it. He knows what really matters to most people--the simple facts of existence from birth to death--and beyond."[8]

Frieda Friesen's story in Blue Mountains of China consists primarily of the everyday activities of a peasant people, and of the basic experiences of life. When her parents's family moved to a homestead near Swift Current, Frieda relates, "Every day towards evening the range cattle went by to the creek to drink, hundreds with little calves running and bawling for their mothers. It was nice to see, but we had to fence because of them and that cost the most money. When the saskatoons and then choke cherries got ripe my sisters went to the ravine and picked but I worked on the house" (p. 44). Marriage, pain, children, and death are for Frieda the simple unquestionable facts of human existence. Her engagement to her fiancé was not romantic but a matter of course, for she says, "There were many Mennonite villages around Ostwick and there I met Johann K. Friesen of Schoenbach who also became my velobta [fiancé] that spring. . . . We had velobung [engagement] in our house three days before my parents moved to Swift Current with all the younger ones and I went back to my uncle to work for seven dollars the

month" (p. 11). She suffers the pain of cancer, but also experiences the joy of a happy family, sufficient food, and peace. The continuity of the circle of life in which Frieda lives is apparent in the naming of the children and grandchildren. One of her grandchildren, Johann, has been named after his father and his grandfather, and another, Friedl, after Frieda her grandmother (p. 150). In children and grandchildren the elemental circle of life and death continues.

The central theme in several short stories set in the rural northern Saskatchewan of Wiebe's childhood--which Wiebe wrote during the mid-fifties under Professor E. M. Salter at the University of Alberta--is death. Although "The Midnight Ride of an Alberta Boy"[9] contains some rather stilted prose and jarring dialogue, it deals honestly, nevertheless, with a basic human experience: death. Buddy, a young farm boy, learns the awfulness and finality of death when his young sister dies of a severe fever.

"Tudor King," another early story, also turns upon a young boy's first encounter with death. Having been enchanted, together with his friends, by the lure of the local eccentric who delusively believes that because his surname is Tudor he is an heir to the British throne, Andy cannot understand his family and the community's ostracism of the old hermit. As Tudor's closest neighbors, Andy's family watches to see that all is well with the old man. After a fierce blizzard, therefore, Andy accompanies his older brother to Tudor's shack where they discover both the hermit and his dog frozen dead. In the old man whom the community thinks mad, [illegible]d his

friends have seen the "fleeting stuff of human majesty" ("Tudor," 32). The eyes of children do not see with the prejudices of the adults. But, like Buddy, Andy comes to a deeper awareness of life's meaning through the experience of death.

Both "The Power"[10] and the story of Elizabeth Block's death--which Wiebe first wrote as a short story ("Life into art," 8), and later incorporated into Peace Shall Destroy Many (pp. 133-48)--are studies in the irony of death. "The Power" begins with heavy-handed imagery of coldness, emptiness, and death as man and wife stand by the graveside with a coffin. A flashback then recounts the happenings of a few hours earlier when the couple went to town to get the land title after having finally paid off the land, to buy another "quarter," and to buy a birthday gift for their son. The father "felt tremendous, as if he were pushing the world around with each expansion of his chest. After five years of drudgery, they finally owned land, and soon would own more--land to pass on to the two children" (p. 131). When they return from town, however, they discover their isolated house burned to the ground and the children dead. The joys of this homesteading couple are shattered; symbolically the snow begins to fall after the burial as winter comes (p. 133).

Wiebe tells the story of Elizabeth's death in Peace Shall Destroy Many more subtly, but again the irony of death is central. Although Deacon Block has worked his whole lifetime so his children may have a good future, his daughter dies while giving birth to an illegitimate child during harvest. Unger, a neighbor who is helping with the harvest, ironically tells Block, "Well Peter, your harvest this year is the best you've ever had!" (Peace, p. 148).

In his stories taken from Western Canadian history, Wiebe displays a remarkable sensitivity to certain elemental emotions that are really antithetical to his own Christian viewpoint. Wiebe admits, in his interview with Margaret Reimer and Sue Steiner, the difficulty of entering into the Indians's way of thinking because their world view is in some respects very foreign to his ("Life into art," 8). This difficulty is acute in the radical difference between the Indians and Wiebe's attitudes towards murder. For the Indians killing is a proof of manhood, but for Wiebe as Christian pacifist all killing is wrong.

Yet, in "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan" Wiebe evokes very effectively the joy of young Siksika braves at attacking a camp of their worst enemies, the Plains Cree. The narrator, an old man now, likes "to remember us all together and how I felt the fire of the coming battle jerk my heart for happiness . . . and Appino-kommit, our leader, his war feathers quivering about his proud head in the sunlight so bright and cold, his eyes finding each one of us down to our very hearts as we stood around him. Proud and happy" ("Along," 49). An important reason for the joy is that through battle youthful warriors become men with the right to have wives who will take care of their lodges. Killing offers a primeval joy, and the narrator remembers that, a moment after he had killed an enemy's horse, "the club of a friend splatters his rider's brains in my face and we roar with laughter" (51). Sadly, however, the narrator recalls the sudden turn in the battle and particularly the death of Otat-to-ye whose sister he loved. What he found most difficult was reporting the news of Otat-to-ye's death to his family.

Wiebe evokes sympathetically both the warrior's joy and pain in battle, and provides an insight into a culture that ritualizes killing to heroism. The narrator muses finally, "That was what made us men, such happiness and glory and pain that could turn quickly as a hand turning" (56). In the primal circle of life and death, the Indians found meaning.

Frieda Friesen, whose life revolves around the realities of food and the crops, marriage and children, and death; Buddy, who discovers suffering and death; and the old Siksika warrior, who has lived amid the life-and-death struggles of tribal rivalry, are the people about whom Wiebe writes. They are people who experience life in its immediacy, and retain contact with its elemental realities.

Story as Rooted in Primitive Peoples Who Retain Contact with the Land

Archaic types of the storyteller were, according to Benjamin, the tiller of soil and the seaman (pp. 84-85). Having grown up on the prairie close to nature, Wiebe is in a sense a storyteller of the former type. In an interview with Reimer and Steiner, Wiebe remarks that Professor Salter at the University of Alberta encouraged him "to write the kinds of stories that I'd lived in northern Saskatchewan when I was growing up as a kid" ("Life into art," 7). Primitive rural experience is a valid subject for art, Wiebe believes, and in several poems that he wrote under Salter he defines himself as a rural artist.

The poet in "New Year's Eve in the Rockies" rejects the enticements of a cheap hedonistic New Year's Eve celebration in the city

in favor of the white purity of the Rockies in fresh snow. "Voices," another early poem, celebrates the life of a lonely farm boy tending the cows. The poem ends with the following effective juxtaposition of city and country:

> In the night-robbed roaring cities
> Where cold is rock-stacked canyons
> Shouting newsmen wave canned voices
> To the screaming deafened streets
>
> And far away, a shuffling boy, old-patched in overalls,
> Crooning, and only sleep birds to hear
>
> Com' 'o-ome Boss, com' 'o-ome Boss,
> Com'mon, com'mon away home Boss.
> All day is gone, it's milkin' time,
> Com' 'o-ome Boss, com' 'ome ("Voices," [41]).

This striking lyric illustrates Wiebe's contention in his interview with George Melnyk that the land means much to him because it exemplifies "that man doesn't change much."[11]

Almost all Wiebe's fiction is rooted in the land, and displays his sensitivity to the primeval natural rhythms that dominate rural folk. The Mennonites in Peace Shall Destroy Many live in harmony with their rural environment. Whether Thom is working the land or doing the chores, the women are picking berries or the men threshing, the novel embodies the immediacy of contact with life that the land gives. Though he has begun to question the Mennonite work ethic, Thom exults with a hymn of praise for the sheer joy of working in

the field:

Grosser Gott, wir loben Dich!
Herr, wir preisen Deine Staerke!
[Great God, we praise you!
Lord, we praise your strengths!]

Morning sunlight sprayed through the reaching branches of the trees, hung wispy with hay clawed from homeward passing racks. New day triumphed in Thom like the song in his throat:

Vor Dir neigt die Erde sich
Und bewundert Deine Werke
[Before you the earth bows
And admires your works] (Peace, p. 79).

Because of the intimate connection between people and land on the prairie where life is still dominated by seasonal cycles, the division of the novel's action into four movements corresponding to the seasons to symbolize the spiritual progress of Wapiti is especially appropriate.

Abe Ross in First and Vital Candle is a rural man who feels a primitive link with nature, and feels quite adrift in the city. Clearly the city serves as a metaphor for Abe's spiritual isolation in Part One of the novel. In repeated attempts to escape his intense loneliness, he walks endlessly, attends a movie or ball game, or goes to a bar. But his walking in the city brings no peace "because it knows no destination; begin and continue" (Candle, p. 9). As he goes to sleep at night, the "murmur of the night city far below, blasted sometimes by an exhaust, eddied through the window" (p. 64). The wasteland of the city reflects his inner confusion.

By contrast, at Frozen Lake in relatively isolated country Abe--despite the fact that he has not resolved his inner turmoil--is at home. Paddling along the lake in a canoe, he is

> precisely comfortable. Abe sat in the bow, maps neglected on his knees; if he stretched out his hand the prow-spurt sprayed chill to his skin. He sat, watching, feeling the prow split the wavelets moving endlessly towards him. The motion on the long plain of Sandhole Lake seemed no motion at all, only an unwavering coming towards them caught in neither time nor place, the motor's unwavering whine shaping no sound but a great stillness that suspended him and canoebow above the relentless incoming ripples. . . . He could almost feel some Elysian hand stroke down the thickness of his beard to brush his lips . . . (p. 118).

Nature at Frozen Lake is, however, not wholly peaceful; Bjornesen, who has enslaved the Indians with his home brew, disturbs its balance. And a vast natural force, the flood, precipitates Abe's final crisis that culminates in his renewal. Nevertheless, even amid his failure to rescue the natives from Bjornesen, to establish a flourishing post for his company, and to achieve peace within himself, Abe comes closest to peace in nature. As he skis across the lake, "He almost forgot them [the Indians] at last and moved in the world of relaxation and freedom, free from much thought save the stride of his legs and the tension of shoulders and arms against poles" (p. 216). Despite nuances in the metaphorical significance of city and country, Abe Ross feels most at home in the almost pristine wilds.

Frieda Friesen, too, lives by the elemental rhythms of the land.

Describing life in the wilderness of the Paraguayan Chaco, Frieda says, "There are always the new grandchildren on the way, but mostly you wait for the rain. The time goes and you look back and years have passed you never thought of as years; the only thing you remember, even the birth years of the children, is how they fit with the rain" (Blue Mountains, p. 142). Time on the Paraguayan Mennonite farms is, as is time on the prairie ("Introduction," Stories, p. xii), still defined by bodily and seasonal cycles.

Although the Indians about whom Wiebe writes are hunters rather than farmers, they stand in even more intimate relationship to the land than do the Mennonites. The story of the buffalo hunt in Temptations of Big Bear is a poignant reminder that the freedom of the Indian life close to nature is doomed, but it at the same time reinforces the close connection between a primitive people and the land. Before the hunt Big Bear

> lay against the ground completely, and the earth warmth grew in him and slowly each sound and movement and colour and whispy smell of the living world worked in him . . . . Spread there completely alert but empty except of the hunt, the total unconsuming unconscious joy of one more run merging with mus-toos-wuk given once more to the River People, at last before him again . . . (Big Bear, p. 127).

The earth is the source of life for the Indians, and it is to be shared by all. Big Bear cannot conceive of ownership of the land because, as he says, "no one can choose for only himself a piece of the Mother Earth. She is. And she is for all that live, alike" (p. 28). Although the Indian culture values freedom and a close

relationship with the land, the white culture values the domination and exploitation of this "wilderness." Governor Laird while he is negotiating treaties happily thinks, "Not quite $53,000 for a bit more than fifty thousand square miles of grass and hills. A down-payment actually, but complete with rivers, valleys, minerals, sky--everything, forever" (p. 69). In contrast to the primitive peoples who live in immediate contact with their environment, the whites have distanced themselves so they can manipulate theirs.

Like Benjamin's archetype of the storyteller who is tiller of the soil, Rudy Wiebe tells stories about people still close to the land.

Story as Rooted in Primitive Peoples Who Retain a Deeply Religious View of Life

Wiebe regards the religious impulse as fundamental to human experience, for he says that all people have a need "to relate to something that is in a sense beyond, larger than, yourself, the other to which you can commit yourself" ("Stream," p. 158). In archaic societies, says Mircea Eliade in The Myth of the Eternal Return, objects or acts acquire value only by virtue of participation in transcendental reality.[12] Although Wiebe regards the impulse to religious belief as basic in all people, he too associates belief in God specifically with primitive people who are close to the land with its primeval rhythms ("Cameron Interview," p. 30). Indeed, in all Wiebe's fiction the religious dimension is prominent.

The reality of religious experience is central in Wiebe's first two novels, Peace Shall Destroy Many and First and Vital Candle.

Although Peace Shall Destroy Many is a story about a community in which religious faith has largely lost its viability, the novel reaffirms in Thom's quest for truth the possibility of renewal. At the beginning, Thom naively and self-righteously assumes the correctness of his forefathers's beliefs. Gradually, however, he comes to recognize evil "out there" in the community. After he has accidentally discovered Herman Paetkau's marriage to Madeleine Moosomin, Thom watches to see how much time passes before any Mennonites from the Church visit the outcast. When finally somebody does, Thom criticizes, "Eight months and not a soul visits Herman. How can they call themselves [Christians] . . ." (Peace, p. 111). Although he can judge other Christians for their failures, he himself has not revisited Herman during those eight months either.

Increasingly critical of Deacon Block's manipulation of the community, Thom never resolves his own quarrel with Herb Unger. Instead it erupts into open violence as he hits Herb in the barn after the Christmas program. Then finally Thom confronts the truth "that no forest and bush, no matter how dense, can keep evil from his life, for it is present in the Wapiti community and within his own heart."[13] On the way home that evening "his body revolted in barely controllable nausea at the remembered crash on Herb's face, the oozing blood. Beastly. One taste eclipsed a thousand imaginings. He, with his months of oh-so-noble questionings, had plumbed the pit" (Peace, p. 237). Having discovered the heart of darkness within himself, Thom recognizes that evil can be conquered only through positive action growing from faith in the Christ of the manger (pp. 237-38). Thom's progression during the novel from unthinking cultural religion

to renewal in vibrant personal faith is convincing.

The question of belief is again basic in First and Vital Candle as Abe Ross grows to a discovery of faith's "first and vital candle" within himself. During his stay in Winnipeg when he and Jim, an old acquaintance, are aimlessly walking along a downtown street, Jim says ironically, "We've missed this damn light about a dozen times. Where are we going, anyhow?" (Candle, p. 56). Their feeling of aimlessness in the city is indicative of their inner lack of spiritual direction, as Abe's loneliness at the party earlier was indicative of his spiritual poverty. Only through his contact with the Bishops and Sally Howell at Frozen Lake does Abe come to recognize the need for belief. Josh Bishop affects Abe most through his life of exemplary Christian practice and full acceptance of the Indians without applying on them the usual missionary pressure to conversion. During the holocaust in Bjornesen's store when Abe degenerates to senseless violence, the fundamental superiority of Josh's way becomes apparent, though Abe does not yet fully recognize it. His blossoming love for Sally is the factor that gradually allows Abe to arrive at an understanding of his past; her death is the crisis that brings him to the threshold of faith. Recognizing finally his meaninglessness, Abe does not come easily to belief. He hears the echo, "'You have run and hidden far, and you are tired. Turn to me now, come now'? In his nothingness he could not know; only later: But he found within himself that he could voice at last: 'I am a miserable sinner. By your grace have mercy, have mercy.' And belief as a child being born in him by the laughter, the happiness of her faith that shone

to a beckoning of great light beyond" (p. 353). Though Abe achieves a measure of peace only with great difficulty,[14] his whole struggle is a religious one.

Wiebe portrays both Eskimos and Indians in the novel as having a strong awareness of transcendent reality, though in the collision with white culture both aboriginal cultures have largely lost their beliefs. Oolulik, in her song of mourning, bewails the loss of her people's primitive faith. She sings,

> "Where have gone the deer,
> The animals on which we live?
> Who gave us meat and blood soup to drink,
> Our dogs strength to run over the snow?
> Once their strong sinews sewed our clothes,
> And their bones gave the sweet-brown marrow;
> Then our houses were warm with the fire of their fat
> And our cheeks smeared with their juices.
> Eyaya--eya (p. 80).

Though long ago she turned Christian at a missionary's evangelistic meeting, Oolulik now knows her mistake. As long as the Eskimos lived by their own legends, they remained vital because the "mighty spirit Pinga" provided game and blessed them in their obedience. Her insight is clear when she tells Abe,

> "When the white man came to the people with guns and oil for heating, it was almost as if we no longer needed shamans or taboo for we could hunt the deer wherever we wished, from far. Then the missionary came and told us of Jesus and we listened and soon our old beliefs seemed of little

use for us to live. We have lived this way most of my life, and every year the deer have been less. And our prayers to God do not bring them back. In the old days the shaman did" (p. 82).

Having lost their intimate connection with nature and with belief, the Eskimos have lost contact with that dimension of life that earlier gave them meaning.

The Ojibwa at Frozen Lake have almost entirely lost their beliefs too, and are being seduced into Bjornesen's perverted religion of home brew and drunken orgies. But the old conjurer, Kekekose, retains a close enough connection with his patron spirits to be able to recover Abe's gun that he has lost miles away up the Frozen River. Because Bjornesen's curses are finally stronger than the conjurer's, the Indians need new myths to replace the old. Significantly Kekekose is the first to commit himself to the new faith, Christianity, as exemplified by the Bishops and Sally. He recognizes that the Indians "must find a path, perhaps a new one" to combat the evil, sickness, and violence that is destroying them (p. 325). Wiebe in First and Vital Candle convincingly portrays the fundamental impulse to faith in transcendental reality.

Blue Mountains of China, as Donald Cameron suggests, "asks above all about man's search for God in a world full of thundering ironies."[15] Jakob Friesen IV in Karatow Colony, Russia, from 1926 until 1928 accumulated ownership of the mill, four farms, and the village stud farm, but was arrested in Moscow while trying to escape with his family to Canada; perhaps, as he claims, he believed only in himself

during those years. That the suffering of his exile in Siberia has kindled a new faith in him, however, is apparent because the lilies in the forsaken convent remind him of Jesus's promise that God looks after his people as after the lilies of the field (Blue Mountains, p. 108). Friesen stands up for the woman prisoner whom the guards intend to rape. Ur, one of the guards, calls Friesen "holy" because he says verses, groans hymns, and prays at work (p. 110). The old prisoner whose wife the guards wish to rape, however, warns Friesen that only one thing matters: to survive (p. 111). For Friesen the prisoner's annoying refrain, "as God is good," raises the question of evil. If God is really good, Friesen asks, "then why did all this happen? To us?" (p. 114). Although initially the harsh experiences in Siberia seem to throw Friesen back upon belief in God, when he arrives in Canada for a visit and coincidentally meets Elizabeth [Driediger] Cereno he claims to believe nothing. Yet, Elizabeth knows this to be a lie (p. 196), because the only alternative for him is to believe or not to believe (p. 193). Though he does not accept any easy clichés, Friesen nevertheless believes strongly in some sort of transcendent meaning in life.

About purpose and meaning in life John Reimer says, "You can never really 'understand' about someone, anyone, even yourself. It is best to believe in them as human; feel that they are alive like you and need warmth, concern" (p. 225). Jakob Friesen IV does not understand, but he feels his connection with transcendent reality. Even more strikingly Frieda Friesen is a peasant woman who feels and believes rather than understands. She recalls a crisis experience of temptation and doubt after which she came "to the true quiet

faith" (p. 46). Her faith provides a pattern, a framework of meaning that answers all of life's questions. Whether she falls off the hay rack and dislocates her shoulder, she and her daughter are seasick on the voyage to Paraguay, or she has cancer Frieda always retains the stoical belief that "it does come all from God, strength and sickness, want and plenty" (p. 10). Frieda knows that such harsh experience of life as that of Jakob Friesen IV's wife "only God has to understand" (p. 147). She has an immediacy of faith that no difficult experiences can destroy.

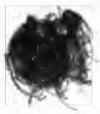
Although Temptations of Big Bear is not religious in any formal sense--in contrast to Wiebe's previous novels--in fact the religious impulse is fundamental to the novel. As Stephen Scobie says, "Wiebe's own deeply religious sensibility extends beyond the Christianity of his previous novels to embrace the Cree beliefs and to present them with deep sympathy."[16] The whites may speak platitudes about the goodness of the Only One and about their religious belief, but that belief has no effect on their everyday lives. That the Indians, on the other hand, live always in an awareness of a larger perspective and indeed assume its relevance is apparent throughout the novel. When the chiefs smoke together or the community gathers for a Thirst Dance, the Indians celebrate their brotherhood and also their relationship to a larger reality. In the intimate connection between primitive man and the land, the transcendent makes itself apparent. As Big Bear says, "I am fed by the Mother Earth. The only water I will be touched by comes from above, the rain from The Only One who makes the grass grow and the rivers run and the buffalo feed there and drink so that I and my children live. That we have life!" (Big Bear, p. 23). To

dominate and exploit the land is to misuse it Big Bear knows, for he insists that the "proper way to live with the Earth is to give each one the right The First One gave every one man. Let every man walk where his feet can walk" (p. 200).

Whether stealing horses, hunting buffalo, or fighting, the Indians always pray for the blessings of the Main One and thank Him for His help. Big Bear addresses even the problem of evil in religious terms; although he doubts the goodness of the Only One in sending the whites and taking away the buffalo, he thinks that "The Spirit must have sent these whites to us so we must find the way He wants us to live with them" (p. 105). Subsequently, in terms reminiscent of Frieda Friesen's stoic acceptance of all things as from God, Big Bear says, "It is good in one way I am cheated, for now I begin to understand what great good The Only One had given me. Now I can truly worship the kindness of That One" (p. 196). Clearly, the primitive people in Temptations of Big Bear evince a profound faith in transcendent reality.

Storytelling, Walter Benjamin argues, has to do with wisdom and the epic side of truth (p. 87). As storyteller Wiebe tells the stories of primitive peoples who are still in contact with experience, who live immediately. The subject matter is the day-to-day experiences of these people, and their perception of meaning and purpose in life. Rooted in the land, the primitive peoples about whom Wiebe writes retain an elemental belief in transcendent reality. As Wiebe theorizes in "Passage by Land," people like stories not for being "true" factually, but for being "true" fictionally.[17] In writing about

the elemental life experiences he knows best, Wiebe creates in his fiction the "felt impression" of life. At base, then, he is a storyteller.



CHAPTER III

WIEBE AS CHRISTIAN / ANABAPTIST ARTIST

The Christian as Storyteller

Rudy Wiebe's first commitment in his fiction is to the story itself, but his further commitment is to the moral implications of story. In his "Introduction" to Story-Makers Wiebe says,

> For man, to make story is to entertain: the teller entertains himself as he entertains his listener. In other words, the emotional impulse to make story drives towards the principle of pleasure. At best, good story does what it does while pleasurably seducing both teller and listener out of their world into its own and, again at best, this seduction may both illuminate the world in which teller and listener actually are and often be the more pleasurable as the seduction becomes less immediate: story worth pondering is story doubly enjoyed (p. ix).

Wiebe here clearly affirms that form and content are interrelated in a work of art. In Meaning and Truth in the Arts, John Hospers suggests that if a work of art is beautiful almost entirely because of its form, it is beautiful without being great; if its beauty lies chiefly in its life-values, or content, it may be artistically great without having much formal beauty.[1] Although these categories cannot rigidly be applied to any particular work of art, Wiebe's fiction

certainly tends more towards greatness in life-values than towards formal beauty.

This tendency confirms Wiebe's predilection to storytelling because, as Benjamin contends, the storyteller always has practical advice or counsel for his reader (p. 86). Story that arises from the experience of people who believe in a higher reality can embody counsel, but the modern novel that arises from solipsistic experience cannot give more than a particular perception of reality. In his interview with Donald Cameron, Wiebe defines himself as an Anabaptist, "a radical follower of the person of Jesus Christ . . ." ("Stream," p. 148). The Anabaptists--consisting of three separate strands, the Swiss, South German, and Dutch--arose early in the sixteenth century as the radical wing of the Reformation. As J. C. Wenger argues, the primary and distinctive emphasis of the Anabaptists was their belief that the essence of Christianity was discipleship, a faithful "following after" Christ in resolute obedience to the ethical demands of the New Testament.[2] Wiebe's own commitment of faith is to this vision.

In the sense that this basic world view will be apparent in his art, Wiebe admits that it will be Christian. But he adamantly rejects the prevailing view of the Christian novel that holds the "Christian has a right to attempt a novel only if it is of . . . [a] propagandizing sort. That is, the novelist should use whatever skill he has in manipulating words and concocting plots to set up an unequivocable signpost pointing to the damnedness of the world without Christ and, as an ultimate feature, making the Gospel attractive to all who are so damned."[3] Such superficially Christian fiction

cannot avoid being unsuccessful, because it presents a simplistic picture of people and avoids raising the profound unanswerable questions of life ("Artist as Witness," 51). In contrast to this approach, Wiebe attempts to write the best stories he can and, because he is a Christian, his views will in some sense be apparent in his work ("Stream," pp. 156-57). In this respect Wiebe shares T. S. Eliot's ideal that Christian literature should be "unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian . . . ."[4]

A measure of Wiebe's honesty in incorporating his Christian vision into his art is his ability to assume a critical stance over against Christianity in such stories as "Millstone for the Sun's Day"[5] and "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" In "Passage by Land" Wiebe says that the original impulse for "Millstone for the Sun's Day" came to him during a church service when he was pondering "some hard words spoken by the usually considerate Jesus . . ." (p. 259). The Gospel of Matthew reports Jesus as saying, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mt. 18:5-6, RSV). "Millstone for the Sun's Day" is the powerful fantasy about an isolated group of Biblical literalists who follow strictly this hard saying. The joy-ride atmosphere of the excursion and Joey's eagerness at having won the prize of a yacht ride contrasts ironically with his mother's fear and the mundane ritual of the horrible drowning. In this story, as in Peace Shall Destroy Many, Wiebe recognizes the perversion into

which religious impulse may turn.

If "Millstone for the Sun's Day" is about a community that has perverted Christian faith, "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" is about an individual who has done so. The psychotic murderer in the story thinks, "That's everybody's mistake about Jesus. He had a lot more things in his mouth than love. That's the forgotten Jesus. Like hanging stones around your neck and into the sea with you, down down, or calling a woman who isn't a Jew like him a dog, just like a lot of other Jews do now, just walk down the pawn street and you'll hear" ("Did Jesus," 50). Considering himself a Bible Christian, the killer bases his ethic on a literalistic reading of Jesus's hard sayings and on his perverted view that because Jesus never laughed the Christian is justified in making life miserable for people. Fanatical and deluded belief in Christianity can be destructive, Wiebe implies, and has often been in the history of Christianity. The psychotic admits that Jesus "raised three and loved them all," but asks, "In all them hundreds of years since, how many you think he killed?" (50). Pervading the whole story is the problem of evil. If Jesus really were "love," then why would he allow such perverts as this one to be? Despite his strongly Christian vision, then, Wiebe is able to be critical of Christianity.

Wiebe's Christian world view is most apparent, however, in his description of people as they are, and in his vision of what they might be. He says that "of the verbal art forms, the novel is really the most amenable to presenting wide-ranging, profound social criticism. . . . [B]eyond the pure diversion of telling a story, it can get people excited by criticizing them and by witnessing

to them of the novelist's particular world view" ("Artist as Witness," 48). Fiction is for Wiebe a primary way of expressing his hopes and aspirations for humanity in the sense that by presenting the "facts" differently he can get people to look at the world in a new way ("Stream," p. 150). Thus, Wiebe's world view infuses two significant dimensions of his fiction: his social criticism and his depiction of the ideal to which people can aspire.

Criticism of People--in Secular Society--as They Are

Because the majority of Wiebe's fiction takes place within a specifically Christian context, much of the social criticism is directed against people who are, or at least consider themselves to be, Christians. But Wiebe also assumes a critical stance over against secular society.

One of the recurrent themes is the criticism of the city with its lack of human contact and lack of religious values. To the poet in "New Year's Eve in the Rockies" the people partying in the city on New Year's Eve seem to be "dead men" (11) and "Pandorian bees" swarming about the deadly charms of the hostess (12).

In First and Vital Candle the city is a metaphor for Abe's feeling of isolation and meaninglessness. Walking about the city, he fails to make contact with anybody except, briefly, with the boy in the restaurant. After an evening's walking during which "the sidewalk under his heels had thudded his aloneness to the ends of his bones," Abe arrives at no destination (p. 9). At the party he attends while he is in Winnipeg, the guests are trapped in their empty lives. The piece from Bach's St. John's Passion that Schwafe

plays urges those "whom care oppresses" to run "to Golgotha" (p. 37), but this is ironical in the pathetic emptiness of the guests's lives. By the end of the party, Abe clearly recognizes the futility of such life and the lack of human contact it conceals. He thinks, "Moments before the people whirling there had been shining rich, handsome, beautiful--where have they all gone?--they blurred past battered to ugliness, gruesome, led by the thin American and his partner, faces skull-like in the darkness, their bony arms rising and falling alternately in crooked sickle-sweeps" (p. 38). Isolation of people from each other and from God characterizes the city in the novel.

Although "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" is first the penetrating story of a psychotic killer's beliefs and attitudes, it contains also a trenchant criticism of the city. The opening description of Edmonton satirizes the phoniness and uniformity of the urban environment as the narrator thinks, "Around this apartment at least they haven't stuck in trees for birds to sit on and try to sing. Just bushes to keep you off the patch of grass too small for a gopher and then up blank like a north end coulee in fall, twenty stories cement straight up and down, maybe seventeen apartments on each, say around twelve or thirteen hundred in all; you know, a grey slab box with metal windows" (40). Inside the apartment block he notices "bile-green couches," pictures of mountain lakes, and--in the elevator--artificial flowers (42). In this sterile atmosphere people never come together; the narrator says, "People in cities don't look at each other; their glances slide over, like the man standing beside me with a face as if he'd slept maybe two minutes in some can last night . . ." (42). The story also subtly implies that the impersonal grey sterility of

the city contributes to the formation of such perverts as this one.

A pervasive theme in Wiebe's fiction is his distinctly Anabaptist criticism of war. In both Peace Shall Destroy Many and Blue Mountains of China Wiebe focuses upon the Mennonite misunderstanding of pacifism, and calls for a more profound understanding of Biblical nonresistance and Christian love. In his Indian fiction, he does not categorically reject violence and killing, but clearly distinguishes between white and Indian motivations for killing. Before the whites came an Indian warrior proved his manhood by stealing horses or killing enemies, but among the whites war is not a test of manhood. As Big Bear notes, the white soldiers leave their wives at home, and work massive destruction with their cannons. Given this new context, Big Bear well understands that killing becomes an impersonal mechanical operation. Such dignified and imaginative exploits as Little Poplar's dancing defiantly along the ridge become anachronistic. To regard Big Bear as a pacifist is obviously inaccurate,[6] but despite Wiebe's willingness in the Indian fiction to recognize the validity of another value system than his own ("Life into art," 8) the novel is certainly not a glorification of violence.

Wiebe's most categorical rejection of war and violence, however, comes in First and Vital Candle. In response to Granger and Marsden's cold-hearted debate about national defense, Schwafe points to the raw bestial reality of killing whether sanctioned by the state or not. He himself has choked a man to death and knows how ugly such a thing is. In the ultimate struggle between two people for life, all interpersonal barriers fall; the person he killed was not an impersonal "Communist," but a "human being" (p. 36). If Schwafe

has experienced the ugliness and brutality of murder, Sally and Josh intellectually repudiate war during the debate with Marsden. Sally debunks Marsden's reference to military defense when she unequivocally terms it hate. Explaining why she does not want the pilot to speak to her pupils about military strategy, Sally says, "It would make no sense to them at all preparing to shoot down someone who might come over to kill you, and not hate them. Anyone you plan to kill before he kills you you just naturally hate" (pp. 233-34). When Marsden protests that, because wars are inevitable, "somebody's got to do the dirty work," Josh responds in distinctly Anabaptist terms:

> "You say that, given the evil in the world someone has to fight it on its own terms--get his hands mucky trying to clean up the muck. . . . Everyone can justify any shady actions this way. But the point is: why don't we, who at least think about it, refuse this dirty work? Refuse aggression, which only frightens an equal counter-aggression in our enemy of the moment? Why not refuse to do the dirty work of meeting force with force; rather meet force with what we now think of as weakness--love? Why not believe that God means what he says, that evil can only be overcome with good?" (p. 240).

Josh extends the claims of pacifism beyond only Christians by arguing that "humanity, in whatever form you find it, recognizes love is essential." For this reason "you don't have to be Christian to know love, to have a conscience . . ." (p. 242). Josh recognizes that to expect whole nations to become pacifistic is probably a hopeless ideal, but like Samuel U. Reimer in Blue Mountains of China he asks, "Can't the individual, at least, where he lives, try?" (p. 244, cf. Blue

Mountains, p. 172). Although Josh's exercise of nonresistant love during the holocaust in Bjornesen's store is artistically more convincing than his exposition of it during the debate with Marsden, the debate does provide a clear delineation of Wiebe's attack on war in his fiction.

The central tension in Temptations of Big Bear between the Indian and white views of the land has, as Stephen Scobie suggests, profound implications for the ecological crisis today,[7] and exemplifies the way in which Wiebe's Christian vision informs the moral counsel in his stories. Because of their respect for the Earth and its bounties as a gift of the Only One, the Indians use the resources carefully and share them with others. As Big Bear says, "We take what the Earth gives us when we need anything, and we leave the rest for those who follow us" (Big Bear, p. 29). By comparison the whites have an intense motivation to possess and dominate the land. In Sitting Bull's view, "Every white is the same, no matter what he calls himself, big or little. He wants more, everything, and the more People talk to him the more of everything they lose" (p. 104). With the coming of the whites the land, open and free as the Indians value it, is destroyed. The underlying metaphor for this change is the transition from buffalo to train. Having signed the treaty, Big Bear is chagrined to find out that the whites have not fulfilled their promises. Instead, he says, "All I find there is the Iron Horse on its track choking the Earth, throwing sparks to set the prairie burning and it of course has no concern since it can outrun any fire" (p. 202). In the whites's view, the domination and ordering symbolized by the train is progress; in the Indians's view it is

destruction.

According to Wiebe, the Indian view of the land coincides almost exactly with the basic Christian belief "that the land is a gift of God! It's not something to hang on to. The land and what it produces you don't make--the seed, the rain, the sun. You are thankful for what it does. You don't push it around; you work with it" ("Melnyk Interview," p. 8). Wiebe's understanding of the Christian view of the land clearly informs his criticism of the whites's greed in the novel. Temptations of Big Bear pronounces judgment upon the white attitude towards domination and possession that has characterized America's growth and is threatening the world today. Governor Dewdney states this danger most concisely when he says, "To control, to humanize, to structure and package such a continent under two steel lines would bring any engineer headier joy than the lyric prospects of heaven. . . . [B]ut old Big Bear has lived into his own understanding of that land and sometimes while I was out there his seemed the more beguiling prospect; it may, in the end, last longer than steel" (pp. 114-15). Reverent natural use of the earth's fruits will preserve the earth, but control and domination will destroy it.

Though the story of "The Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer" takes place within a church setting, its criticism of today's scientific myth is a critique not only of the church, but of all society. Stephen Toulmin argues that myth is not an outmoded system of belief, but the underlying basis for how people in each age see the world.[8] Modern man who is skeptical of religious experience believes implicitly nevertheless the scientist's explanation that thunder, for example, is caused by atmospheric electricity. R. D. Laing in The Politics

of Experience holds that the Western World, having given itself over completely to the myth of science, which presupposes that only the so-called "outer," "objective" phenomena are real, denies the existence of the so-called "inner" world. People no longer have faith in God, yet believe in even untested scientific hypotheses.[9]

The view implicit in "Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer" is surprisingly similar. An ethnic Mennonite, Samuel Reimer is a marginally successful farmer who knows little about either world affairs or Biblical theology. One night, however, he hears a voice calling, "Samuel, Samuel. . . . I am the God of your fathers, the Lord your God. Go and proclaim peace in Vietnam" (Blue Mountains, p. 158). His skeptical pastor suggests he should wait to hear the voice again, and then tape record it. Having done this, Reimer who thinks that the voice he heard is on the tape plays it for his wife and the pastor. Neither listener hears the voice, but the tape is somehow unusual. Though nobody except Reimer hears the voice, the needle on the tape recorder moves during the supposedly silent intervals, and during precisely these intervals Reimer hears the voice. The minister who believes in the scientific myth dismisses this as "some--electrical mistake . . ." (p. 167), and confirms his opinion by having an electrical expert discover the tape to be "defective" (p. 169). He points out to Sam that in primitive times "everybody heard their gods talking, Assyrians, Greeks, Hittites, everybody," but in contemporary times such hearing is impossible (p. 176). On the other hand, Reimer is certain that the voice he has heard is the voice of God; although formerly he nominally believed in God, now he has experienced Him. The criticism of today's world

is incisive. Somebody who has heard the voice of God is automatically judged mad. But Wiebe's vision in "Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer," as in all his fiction, is that the "inner" world is at least as real as the "outer."

Criticism of People--in Christian Society--as They Are

Much of the social criticism in Wiebe's fiction is directed specifically against the church and its members. In "The Artist as Witness To and Critic of Society" Wiebe argues, "Why should we Christians go about criticizing only the world; it does not pretend to be perfect. We claim to be following a perfect Lord; surely we should be evaluating ourselves, not others" (56). As Donald Cameron suggests, Wiebe in his work expresses the "validity and importance of religious values by taking them for granted as a framework, and then having the debate go on within that context--examining, for instance, the sense in which even devotion to the religious life is a fertile source of error . . ." ("Stream," p. 158). In a sense this criticism of the church in itself implies an affirmation of the ideal to which it is not being faithful. Beyond that, of course, Wiebe also emphasizes the ideal itself.

One of the fundamental criticisms that Wiebe directs against the church in Peace Shall Destroy Many and Blue Mountains of China is that it is a creedal rather than existential body of believers. Historically, the Anabaptists stressed voluntary membership in a group of true believers, outgoing Christian concern, and the purity of the church. Backsliders were reprimanded and, if they remained unrepentant, expelled.[10] According to George H. Williams, the threat of persecution

was a primary force in prompting the followers of Menno Simons in the Netherlands to retreat from the world.[11] Through persecution and the natural loss of fervor in any renewal movement, the Mennonites gradually lost their historical impulse to outgoing Christian concern and perverted the originally proper desire for a pure church to a "ghetto" mentality. Wiebe himself uses this term for the Christianity that retreats into isolation. In his essay, "The Ghetto, the Launch Pad, the Desert," he vigorously rejects "ghetto" strategy because Christ rejected it and because it cannot be reconciled with "witness and love."[12] The withdrawal from what should be the real concerns of Christians, then, Wiebe criticizes in both Peace Shall Destroy Many and Blue Mountains of China.

The underlying tension in Peace Shall Destroy Many is between the church as the traditional institution it is and the church as the dynamic outgoing body of believers it ought to be. Deacon Peter Block's name--Peter, the rock, and Block--is indicative of his solidity as a towering individual who tries to create an island of holiness in a world of despair. Retaining German as their language and a separate community in the wilderness, the Mennonites in Wapiti attempt to perpetuate the traditions of their forefathers. For Block personally, as for the whole community, the urge to purity grew out of a strong desire to wipe out bad experiences in Russia, to make a new beginning for their children. During the Church meeting held to discuss the unauthorized use of English at a school picnic, Deacon Block says ironically, "If we are to have a witness in the land we must remain firm in the ways of our fathers!" (p. 59). Withdrawal into a pure society, however, is hardly, Wiebe implies, a witness to the world.

The novel portrays, as Cameron argues, the way in which this notion of preserving a pure society turns to pride and then to racism ("Cameron Interview," p. 34). The Deacon believes that "a strong, unblemished church" is necessary to support the Church's missionary in India, but tells Thom, "You will undermine this community completely by trying to bring breeds--and Indians naturally follow--into it. They are basically different from us--qualitatively" (p. 205). In the novel Wiebe sustains a subtle parallel between the Wapiti community and Nazi Germany to reinforce the criticism of its failure to practice outgoing Christian love. Although the community was horrified at Hitler's ravaging Europe, the people nevertheless secretly suspected that "only a German could set the whole world on its tail like this" (p. 30). Juxtaposed to this observation is a reference to the Mennonites's racist attitude towards the Indians; at the school picnic, the Mennonites "stared [at the Indians] as they would at any good land that needed clearing" (p. 30). The real reason why Thom cannot continue his work with the Indian children is, as Pete Block says, that the Mennonite Church will refuse to accept converts who are not ethnic Mennonites into their fellowship (p. 194). Deacon Block is, as long as his power lasts, something of a dictator in Wapiti, and Pastor Lepp equates obedience to Block's authority with godly behavior (p. 88). Wielding his power effectively, the Deacon almost succeeds in expelling the natives from the community before his empire crumbles. As Thom comes to recognize, establishing a pure society does not enable the Wapiti Church to practice the outgoing love that is central to the Biblical message.

Tradition among the Mennonites of Wapiti has it that their

prosperity is a sign of their righteousness and that the Indians's poverty is a confirmation of their sinfulness. Again Thom, as he moves to new insights, is a moral measure in the novel. Although initially he works without question, he comes to wonder where in work virtue ends and cupidity begins (p. 82). And soon he thinks that "there should be more to living than work, and more work. Friendship perhaps?" (p. 139). The Deacon's family is the most efficient in the community, but Elizabeth's premature death is an ironical comment upon the Deacon's material success. Commitment to work in itself is not, Wiebe implies, Christian.

Thom's struggle with the question of military service focuses another dimension of tradition that Wiebe attacks in Peace Shall Destroy Many. Brother Goertzen defines the traditional Mennonite attitude towards nonresistance when he says, "As we cannot imagine Him [Jesus] lifting a hand to defend himself physically, so we, His followers, conquer only by spiritual love and not by physical force. Always only love . . . all are included when He says, 'This is my commandment, that you love one another even as I have loved you'" (p. 12). Yet, this has come in Wapiti to mean, as Joseph Dueck contends and Thom comes to recognize, withdrawal and noninvolvement. As Annamarie Lepp observes, for the Mennonites to assume piously that they are living Christ's peace, while in fact they are contributing food and supplies to the war effort and benefiting from high war prices for their produce, is mere avoidance (pp. 47-48). By the end of the novel Thom knows that only aggressive effort against war and pain, no matter what the risk, is worthy of the Christian.

The church in Blue Mountains of China too is largely a merely

cultural institution. In the Mennonite colonies of the Paraguayan Chaco, the Mennonites consider German the Biblically prescribed language. Elder Wiebe the Older epitomizes the Mennonites' cultural belief:

> He intoned that the Bible, the Catechism and the Kirchenbuch [register of church members], the plow and the shovel were the faith of their fathers. It was enough for them, and it is enough for their children and children's children, now and for evermore. . . . New ideas, book learning, singing in several voices are unnecessary and dangerous. The desire for knowledge leads to pride and self-deception. . . . Man's duty is to obey, pray, work, and wait in terror for God's wrath (Blue Mountains, p. 100).

Although Anna Friesen has a momentary glimpse at the well of transcending this tradition, she is too completely enmeshed in it to escape. The Mennonites in Russia hold to a similar cultural faith. Jakob Friesen V has been trained as "a good Mennonite boy; learned quiet joy and denial and prayers, sat between parents in church or, later, in front with the other boys, decently and quietly . . ." (p. 28). During the crisis of the Mennonite community, Jakob V has no moral force within himself upon which to call and can only automatically repeat the prayer that he learned as a child: "Blessed savior make me pure that in heaven I may . . ." (p. 12).

Not only is the church largely a traditional institution in Blue Mountains of China, but sharp social differentiation belies any claim to Christian brotherhood. Jakob V's assumed superiority over Escha exemplifies the prevailing Mennonite attitude towards the

Russians. Jakob assumes that Russians belong in the barn and are good only for menial work, and considers Escha to be "like every other Russian peasant working on a Mennonite farm, just a bastard . . ." (p. 19). This reference to Escha as bastard together with Jakob V's mention of Escha's reddish-blond hair as giving away "some fly-by-night father" (p. 19), repeated references to the Friesens as having reddish-blond hair, and finally Serebro's saying that Jakob V and Escha look alike enough to be brothers suggests, on one hand, that Escha may be the illegitimate son of Jakob IV and, on the other, that the two are so alike that class differentiation is ludicrous. Anyway, the Mennonites in Russia relegate not only Russians to the status of inferior peasants, but Mennonites too. Jakob V remembers that "every Mennonite squatting on the commonland south of Gnadenfeld" had worked for his father at some time (pp. 14-15).

As in Russia, in Paraguay the Mennonites have little contact with the natives. Because purity in the church has come to mean ethnic and cultural distinctness, only visionaries such as young David Epp and John Reimer associate at all with the natives. That the Mennonites and the Indians have little contact is a judgment upon any Mennonite claim to the Christian practice of love. The distinctions in the social hierarchy among Mennonites themselves in Paraguay are more minuscule than in Russia, but are present nevertheless. Kanadier [Canadian Mennonites] in the colony know, for example, that they are more faithful than the Russlander [Russian Mennonites] because they emigrated twice for their faith; by contrast the Russlander emigrated only once and compromised their beliefs drastically before finally leaving Russia (p. 100). Living on neighboring colonies and all being

Mennonites, the Kanadier and Russlander relate so little to each other that the minute differences between them grow to almost legendary proportions. The Kanadier, for example, believe that the Russlander spend too much time laughing and partying, sing in harmony, and even sing non-Christian songs (p. 101). Sharp social stratification betrays the lack of Christian community among the Mennonites.

Mennonites both in Russia and in Canada have compromised their Christian values by acquiescing to the idolatry of materialism. Through hard work, prudent dealing, and use of cheap Mennonite and Russian labor, Jakob IV has built a sizable financial holding before the Communists take it away. This points, as Serebro notes, to an inconsistency between principle and practice. A few Mennonites, such as the Friesens, live "fat"--with the privileges of Zentralschul [secondary school] and Kroeger clocks--at the expense of the poor workers at the end of the village. And yet these wealthy Mennonites are the most vocal in using the religious language of being "born again" (p. 32). If the wealthy Mennonites really believed this, Serebro implies, they would not be mistreating either their fellow Mennonites or the Russians. In "Black Vulture" when Jakob attempts to bribe the officers one of them remarks, "Isn't that something, for a man who wasn't, according to his own affirmed word, a Mennonite never swears of course, a kulak. To still have some slavery rubles!" (p. 65). This implies both Friesen's ingenuity and his good fortune, but also, as Franz Epp mentions, his deceit (p. 65). Somehow, Wiebe suggests, Friesen's priorities are not right.

Mennonites in Canada have fallen into the same idolatry. Samuel Reimer, when the community opposes his going to Vietnam, condemns the

Christians in his Church for just "soaking up the fat of the land, not doing their job," which is "not sitting here just talking, growing fat on the land; not fighting but trying to reconcile, not killing but trying somehow to proclaim peace in Vietnam for the God of my fathers, for the Lord my God" (pp. 177-78). One such Mennonite growing fat is Dennis [Willms] Williams who devotes his full energies to his numerous business concerns, and condemns John Reimer for wasting his time and drawing negative publicity towards the Mennonites (p. 204). Reimer points out the incompatibility between pursuing and having great wealth, and belief in a God who loves all people. After Dennis finally admits that he believes God loves everybody because the Bible says so, John responds, "I know it does, but when I think of the begging children I saw in Ecuador and Brazil and look at you and your--chauffeur, it's almost impossible. To believe" (p. 205). In Reimer's view, the religious claims of people must make a difference in their everyday lives (p. 214). Dedication to purely material wealth is inconsistent, the novel suggests, with Christian belief.

In each of his novels, Wiebe attacks those Christians who claim evangelistic concern, but do not practice outgoing love for others. Joseph Dueck in Peace Shall Destroy Many points to the hopeless incongruity of the Wapiti Church's sending a missionary to India, yet not accepting the Indians immediately around them into their fellowship (p. 58). John Reimer in Blue Mountains of China, while he is in Paraguay, comes to recognize the impossibility of ever understanding another culture and to question the attempt by Christians to settle the hunting Indian tribes to farming (p. 155).

The obstacle white missionaries have in separating culture

from religion, Wiebe suggests in Temptations of Big Bear, is almost insurmountable. Although Missionary John McDougall has a certain sensitivity towards the Indians, his ethnocentrism is clear when he says that "most whites find it impossible to imagine how deeply every Indian action is rooted in his, albeit almost completely false and most tragically limited, faith in The Great Spirit . . ." (p. 42). Because McDougall's first obligation is to God and country, he cannot do otherwise than advise the Indians to sign treaties that can only benefit the whites. This Big Bear recognizes most clearly when he rejects--because each has been baptized by a white missionary--the urgings of James Seenum and Sweetgrass that he too should sign treaty. For Big Bear who believes in the Only One, the different conceptions of divinity represented by the Methodist, McDougall, and by the Roman Catholic, Lacombe, betray a lack of genuine faith in these men (p. 23).

The story of Oolulik in First and Vital Candle also embodies Wiebe's indictment of destructive missionary activity. As long as they lived by their own legends, the Eskimos remained strong and vital because the "mighty spirit Pinga" provided game and blessed them in their obedience; prayers to the Christian God, however, do not have the same efficacy. Abe Ross states the problem most concisely when he argues that the missionaries in the north "talk most about wanting 'the Eskimo to remain Eskimo' when they join the church, yet tear them away from some of the very things that are most Eskimo" (p. 90). Despite his own strong commitment to Christian faith, Rudy Wiebe is critical of the predominant Christian attitude towards evangelism.

Vision of People as They Might Be

Over against the pervasive strand of social criticism in Wiebe's fiction is an equally strong evocation of the ideal that people can attain. In a world and a church in which much is evil, the possibility for renewal remains. Wiebe says, in his interview with Cameron, that "the conscious knowledge of being at peace, in a state of rest in relation to everything around you, because somehow you are in a state of rest in relation to the God that has made it all" is "the main thing that Jesus is all about . . ." ("Stream," p. 156). This concept of peace is most clearly defined by Joseph Dueck in Peace Shall Destroy Many. In his letter to Thom, Joseph rejects the views of peace as a lack of conflict, and as a state of safety and blessedness. Instead he defines the New Testament understanding of peace as

> not a circumstance but a state of being. The Christ-follower has the peace of reconciliation with God and therefore the peace of conscious fellowship with God through God in Christ. Peace is not a thing static and unchanging: rather a mighty inner river . . . that carries all outward circumstances before it as if they were driftwood. . . . He brought no outward quiet and comfort such as we are ever praying for. Rather, he brought inward peace that is in no way affected by outward war but quietly overcomes it on life's real battlefield: the soul of man. By personally living His peace, we are peace-makers (pp. 162-63).

Peace begins as a right relationship with God, but beyond that is expressed in meaningful outward witness of life motivated by that peace.

In Wiebe's fiction peace belongs to people who come to faith in God. Frieda Friesen relates the story of how she "learned to know our Lord Jesus. Through many prayers and sleepless nights and God's grace I found forgiveness of all my sins and came to the true quiet faith" (Blue Mountains, p. 46). Sally Howell describes the experience as being "like a small flame starting which you can't snub and that flame is Jesus Christ, in person. . . . It's an act of grace, complete irrefutable grace from God catching fire in you, and it's real. That's what makes you so happy . . ." (Candle, p. 290). Recognizing finally that of himself he has no meaning, Abe Ross too arrives at the threshold of God's peace (p. 353). Thom, after the confrontation with his own evil, knows that God's peace comes through the Christ of the manger as reenacted in the Christmas pageant. In "All On Their Knees" Herman Paetkau comes to a new awareness of the peace that is his through the experience of Christ. Reading Thomas Hardy's evocation --in "The Oxen"--of the hope represented by the birth of Christ, Herman finds peace: "Gradually his broad face softened, as if a fathomless serenity blossomed like a child's laughter in him."[13]

Yet, establishing the right relationship with God is, in Wiebe's fiction, only the beginning of what it means to be truly at peace. After that beginning the neophyte must radically live Christ's peace in the world. The sort of peace that destroys Wapiti is the purely external lack of conflict and the prosperity that the community, largely through Deacon Block's efforts, has achieved by the beginning of the novel. Rejecting Wapiti's withdrawal into the wilderness to establish a pure church, Joseph Dueck insists that "mere refusal

will not do: positive action alone is possible" (Peace, p. 60). The endless round of work in Wapiti with its ultimately selfish objectives is a negation of such positive action. The alternative to withdrawal is, Annamarie Lepp suggests, being "as aggressive as the others, just in the opposite direction" (p. 93). What Thom comes to know by the end of the novel is that "if in suppression and avoidance lay defeat, then victory beckoned in pushing ahead. Only a conquest by love unites the combatants. And in the heat of this battle lay God's peace" (p. 238).

In this understanding of discipleship as active opposition against evil lies Wiebe's vision for how to transcend Wapiti's failures in dealing with the war and with their Indian neighbors. Nonresistance, despite Brother Goertzen's theologically correct statement of its meaning, has in Wapiti come to mean noninvolvement. Joseph's voluntary service in the Medical Corps demonstrates his rejection of this stance, for he explains, "As a Christian I must do something about the misery in the world, even though there are aspects about the Medical Corps none of us like. I find I cannot--lose myself behind bush and pretend the misery is not here" (p. 63). Thom too comes to recognize that "we are spared war duty and possible death on the battlefield only because we are to be so much the better witnesses for Christ here at home" (p. 238).

One of the practical aspects of this involvement is the relationship between the Mennonites and Indians in Wapiti. Of the adults in the Church only Joseph and Thom, by teaching the Indian children Bible stories, attempt any real contact with them, but Thom is finally forced to give up these lessons when he realizes that the Church will never

accept Indians as members. Yet, the novel projects hope in the relationship between the Mennonites and Indians and, as Hildegard Tiessen suggests, this hope is most fully embodied in young Hal Wiens.[14] Hal appears in each of the novel's lyrical preludes except, significantly, the one called "Winter." From the beginning he embodies new life, the possibility of renewal in the stagnant community. During the opening prelude Hal and Jackie Labret, a half-breed, enjoy together the "pushing life of spring" (p. 10). He does not recognize the racial distinctions between Mennonites and half-breeds that his parents perpetuate; "'Half-breed' to Hal was merely a species of being that did certain things he himself was not allowed to do because they were 'bad'" (p. 15). In the Christmas pageant Hal and Jackie together "discover" the baby Jesus in the barn. The children, Wiebe implies, can best change the direction of tradition. At the end of the novel, Hal is the one who announces that the "bush," symbolic of Wapiti's isolation, must come down. His wish for spring so he and Jackie "could go lookin' for frogs' eggs again" (p. 238) underlines the hope for renewal that the novel embodies and confirms the new direction Thom has found.

Radical involvement in the world where it hurts is the commitment of Josh and Lena Bishop and Sally Howell in First and Vital Candle. Josh describes their vocation at Frozen Lake as being the "ordinary job of a Christian--showing people that the life of following Jesus Christ is one of concern and care for others, not self" (p. 245). In contrast to the missionaries in "Oolulik" and in Temptations of Big Bear, the Bishops's rationale for living among the Indians is not the

innate superiority of Christianity. Josh explains that they are not attempting to lead the Indians away from their beliefs, but to provide a viable new belief because the whites have already destroyed the natives's primitive faith. Kekekose, the Bishops's first convert, recognizes the validity of this mission when he commits himself to Christianity (p. 325). The Bishops are as effective as they are in their evangelistic efforts because they live their beliefs rather than merely teach them. More convincing than his harangue of Marsden, for example, is Josh's Christly gesture of peace during the eruption of violence in Bjornesen's barn. This gesture embodies the possibility in the novel for transcending violence by aggressive Christian love.

In Blue Mountains of China too the ideal Christian way of life consists in active decisive involvement in the world rather than either escapism to the supposed purity of some new wilderness or acquiescence in the seductions of materialism. Although the Mennonite people as a whole seeks in the novel for a secure place in which to practice its beliefs in peace, several visionaries recognize the inadequacy of this quest. David Epp, who leads a whole village of Mennonites from the Amur region in Russia across the river into China, decides after the escape has succeeded that he must return to the villages they left behind. In China after the conversation with Greta Suderman, his guilt at having forsaken the others in Russia grows. On the night before they plan to have communion David attempts to rationalize their escape, but repeatedly remembers their selfishness and their struggle: "We cannot think of Number Four; can we get out? How can we think of what happens to them; can we get out? . . . We

can't let Franz know because his sister is in Number Four; they'll tell them, it's all out and kaput [ruined]; tell him an hour before we leave . . ." (Blue Mountains, p. 130). Finally David recognizes that his commitment must be to return to Russia in an attempt to help the others, whether the attempt is likely to succeed or not. Entrusting his wife and son to the care of his best friend, he fulfills what he knows to be his Christian obligation to others in need. The beauty of the blue mountains is, David knows after he is back in Russia, "only his imagination. Or romantic nostalgia" (p. 140). To seek escape from involvement is to compromise one's Christian commitment.

The visionary commitment of David Epp inspires three other young men to radical Christian discipleship. Epp's son in Paraguay has dedicated himself to working among the Indians. That he lives what he believes as his father did is clear when he and John Reimer encounter the injured Indian chief. Despite their obligation to bring supplies to the station, David insists that they first drive the chief back to the hospital (p. 153). Although he receives no support from his community, Samuel U. Reimer too is committed to decisive outgoing Christian action. Having received what he regards God's call to go to Vietnam, he comes to believe that "maybe one man can't change the way the world runs. But can't he do something, anything, just some little thing maybe about what he thinks is worst? Can't he?" (p. 172). He knows that by providing his family with affluence he cannot be the sort of example to them that David Epp with his radical action was for his son. Christian commitment prescribes that one must do what he knows right, whether it seems efficacious or not.

John Reimer--Canadian Mennonite Everyman, from Nabachler

Manitoba, Canadian Mennonite Everytown[15]--in carrying a cross along the Trans-Canada Highway is attempting to recover the meaning of discipleship, of following Jesus. In Reimer's view, Jesus was "on earth to lead a revolution! A revolution for social justice, the terrible question of his day as it is in ours was and is social injustice to the poor, to the racially oppressed, to the retarded and the helpless" (p. 215). The church cannot be mere form less important than making a great fortune. Rather the "church Jesus began is us living, everywhere, a new society that sets all the old ideas of man living with other men on its head, that looks so strange it is either the most stupid, foolish thing on earth, or it is so beyond man's usual thinking that it could only come as a revelation right from God" (p. 215). The Christian's obligation is radical involvement: he must "live the concern for others and love that Jesus showed" (p. 221). The cross Reimer carries is a metaphor for his discipleship. Significantly he does not continue walking west to the blue Rockies, as though to escape involvement where he is; instead he symbolically turns north at Calgary and heads for Edmonton.

Rather than withdrawal or escapism into a supposedly pure society that degenerates into racism or materialism, the Christian way is radical altruistic love. One of the fundamental strands in Wiebe's fiction is, then, a Christianity that combines criticism of the world as it is with a vision of the world as it might be. The profoundly moral nature of Wiebe's artistic vision qualifies him as storyteller.

CHAPTER IV

WIEBE AS HISTORICAL STORYTELLER

According to Walter Benjamin, storytelling is often a combination of the "lore of faraway places" and the "lore of the past" (p. 85). A strong sense of the past permeates almost all Wiebe's fiction, and his two most recent novels, Blue Mountains of China and Temptations of Big Bear, as well as several short stories dealing with Indian subjects are specifically works of historical fiction. In Wiebe's view, the objective "facts" of historical events are not knowable, but through imaginative re-creation the artist can best get at the truth in historical events. As a Christian, Wiebe holds that history does have meaning and that his works of historical fiction are in a sense reinterpretations of the "facts" in Russian Mennonite and Western Canadian history. History in fiction for Wiebe is, however, not merely an antiquarian interest, but is an exploration of today. Through imaginative re-creation, Wiebe in his historical fiction recaptures the life experiences of people who lived in the past. In so doing, he is a master storyteller.

Wiebe's View of History in Fiction

Wiebe recognizes that history is never objective because each individual sees a given story from his own point of view ("More storytellers," 10). That the teller of a story can very easily change it Frieda Friesen knows. When her grandchildren ask her to tell a story,

she says, "I have to be careful or I'll start making it up, they like to hear so much" (Blue Mountains, p. 7). Not only can the storyteller consciously change the story, but his memory of historical happenings is not static. While he is telling the story of the "Black Vulture," Franz Epp reflects,

> Actually, I'm not sure when I first, or if I really saw it [the "black vulture"]. At least I can't remember it as if I had so I can't say "this and this and so and so" is exactly like it was. . . . [W]hen you keep thinking so long of one thing, after a while you can't be certain whether you actually saw it like that, then, right from the start, or whether that little time so long ago has foreshortened in your mind, the understanding you got from later when most of it had happened shifting to earlier in time as you remember it, your remembrance sort of organizing itself in a more logical way as you keep thinking over the years (Blue Mountains, p. 56).

Because memory is dynamic, the details of a story can change within an individual's mind.

In his recent story "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" Wiebe rejects the common conception that historical facts are knowable and objectively verifiable by reference to historical data. The objective telling of an historical story is impossible because both those who recorded the "facts" initially and those who subsequently interpret them are biased. After ostensibly attempting to re-create objectively a story from Canadian Indian history, the narrator in "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" realizes that "if I ever could, I can no longer pretend to objective, omnipotent disinterestedness. I am no longer

a spectator of what has happened or what may happen: I am become an element in what is happening at this very moment."[1] That is, history does not happen in a vacuum "back there" somewhere, but is imaginatively re-created by the artist. And because people hold varying world views, different people may interpret even the same "facts" differently.

A basic dimension of Wiebe's historical fiction is how to interpret the "facts." The narrator at the beginning of "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" suggests that "presumably all the parts of the story are themselves available"; the story of Almighty Voice is "one of finite acts, of orders, of elemental feelings and reactions, of clear legal restrictions and requirements" (p. 112). Yet, as the reference to "elemental feelings and reactions" immediately indicates, the "facts" of history can be seen in various ways.

In the interpretation of historical "facts" Wiebe's Christian viewpoint is readily apparent. He says, "What's so radical about the way Jesus looks at things is that he refuses to look at facts the way people usually look at them. I think this is really why Jesus tells so many stories, to make people look at facts in a different way . . ." ("Stream," p. 150). In using historical materials, the writer of fiction has an advantage over the historian because his mode of presentation, fiction, assumes that he is not presenting a pictorial account of what happened, that his way of looking at things is not the only way. Thus, "he goes in and shows you, This is the way I see it, as it could have happened" ("Stream," p. 152). This gives the artist, Wiebe thinks, a "fantastic freedom . . . of shaping that thing according to some kind of world view that he has, some kind of concept of what people are like" ("Stream," p. 152).

Wiebe's Historical Fiction as a Reinterpretation of the "Facts" of Russian Mennonite History

Blue Mountains of China, a novel based on Russian Mennonite history, demonstrates Wiebe's attempt to reinterpret the "facts" of that history from his Christian perspective. Mennonite historians, until recently, have interpreted the Russian Mennonites's history of persecution and wandering in search of a peaceful place as a natural consequence of radical discipleship. This understanding of their history also imbues the folk consciousness of the Russian Mennonites. Rather than compromise their faith, Mennonites widely believe, their forebears risked suffering and persecution to find a place where they could freely live their beliefs. Perhaps the classic expression of this view is Sanford C. Yoder's reporting a young Mennonite colonist in Mexico as saying, "Great-grandfather migrated with his family from Prussia to South Russia via the wheelbarrow route. He lies buried there. Grandfather with married sons and daughters came to Canada in 1873. He sleeps beneath the soil in Manitoba. Now father, an old man, has brought his family to Mexico where he is starting all over again."[2] In evaluating this attitude Yoder concludes, "On the whole . . . the motive which prompted their attitude was unselfish, and arose out of a desire to be faithful to the principles in which they devoutly and sincerely believed."[3]

The pious view that the Mennonites's wandering in history was always motivated by faith is clearly articulated by the narrator in "The Well," For the Kanadier in Paraguay "it was simply a fact that a child in Simons Colony might know; their fathers left Russia in 1874-80 and emigrated to Canada because the Russian world was becoming

impossible for their beliefs, but these Russlander found theirs adjustable enough to stay on until 1929" (Blue Mountains, p. 100). This attitude of the Mennonites towards their history of wandering indicates not only self-righteousness and pride, but also an idealized view of their history. With this interpretation of the "facts" Wiebe disagrees in Blue Mountains of China. Many of the Mennonites who left Russia or Canada, he suggests, did not do so because of faith, but because of economic and social pressures or because of fear.

Isaak Friesen's emigration to Canada in the 1870's was prompted by purely economic necessity. Born the younger twin brother of Jakob Friesen III, Isaak did not inherit the family farm. Muttachi relates that old Jakob II "said not one word, just gave him money and atje [goodbye]" (p. 26). Those Mennonites squatting at the edge of the Russian colonies left because of the need for more land during the 1870's, and others, such as Helmut Funk, emigrated to Paraguay during the 1920's because of the economic factor. Jakob Friesen IV expands his personal holdings in Russia during the 1920's until the Communists force him away. As Jakob V explains, "The commission before harvest said we should deliver 1000 pood, and we've even bought an extra 800 besides that to deliver and there's not a kernel . . ." (p. 15). The motivation of many emigrants, the novel implies, was not faith but economic necessity.

In other cases, the motivation was simply fear, the natural impulse to self-preservation. Samuel Reimer, the father of Samuel U. and John Reimer--who in Franz Epp's story is called Ernst Balzer and mistakenly called Ernst by Samuel U. Reimer himself later in the novel (p. 177)--is motivated to leave Russia primarily by his fear

and selfishness. When the GPU arrest only Jakob Friesen IV in Moscow, Balzer-Reimer has no thought for either Friesen or his wife but only marvels, "Ohh God, my God how marvelous are Thy ways, how He answers prayer!" (p. 66). David Epp's reply, "Ernst, I think Mrs. Friesen was praying too" (p. 66), is a comment not only on the problem of evil, but also on Balzer-Reimer's selfishness.

Because of fear and the elemental impulse to self-preservation, the Mennonites from David Epp's village in Russia's Amur region flee across the river into China without warning friends and relatives in neighboring villages and at least attempting to help them escape too. Erna, Epp's wife, knows that not everybody has honestly shared all he has with the group; people have kept back some for themselves, "some here, some there, under the rags, skirts maybe . . ." (p. 120). Selfishness is most apparent in the intense desire of parents to save children, especially of fathers to save sons, from hunger and pain. Erna Epp tells David, "We <u>have</u> to get more for the baby" (p. 120); Greta Suderman whose child has died during the escape at first rebels against sharing her milk with Epps and Dycks's babies because of her harsh experience. And Wiebe does not minimize the sharp reality of hunger, especially of the children, and the real emotional demands that this makes on the parents. Little Bernhard and Hannili Rogalski play a game using five stones to represent food. Hannili whispers,

> "That makes three hams and four loaves of <u>bulchi</u> [white bread]."
>
> "Yeah. I'll go tell the committee," Bernie answered, and slid the five stones under his shirt. In a second they emerged again, and moving.

> Hannili said, "And don't forget the Epps."
>
> The stones flew and suddenly Bernie said, "Yeah. There's the milk, just right," and the stones vanished, to her this time. "And fresh buns too."
>
> "Made with butter?" Her face refolded in bliss (pp. 121-22).

A poignant play upon Jesus's words, "What father among you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone . . ." (Lk. 11:11, RSV),[4] this vignette emphasizes the intense emotional impact of hungry children upon their parents.

Yet, healthy love of family can easily be perverted into purely selfish concern that destroys all Christian altruism. For Deacon Block in Peace Shall Destroy Many the survival of his son is the only religion. Withholding grain from the government and meat from the village food committee, Block thinks, "May my soul be damned if I lose my one son to feed his [John Esau's] eight!" (Peace, p. 127). In Blue Mountains of China, Jakob Friesen IV leaves enough money behind for his son to be able to escape all the way to Canada, and Jakob V's failure to do so remains a blot upon his father's memory for lifetime. Jakob IV also has plenty of gold for himself and his family in Moscow as they attempt to escape. His concern is, therefore, almost entirely selfish.

Over against the majority of Russian Mennonites who emigrate because of economic necessity or selfishness or fear, several visionaries in the novel reject these motivations as unworthy of Christians. Yet, as Bernie Harder in a review of Blue Mountains of China suggests, the Mennonite community does not understand these people and considers them misfits.[5] David Epp decides that his

Christian commitment calls for him to do more than merely provide for his immediate family's needs. Recognizing his wider obligation to the Mennonite villagers they have forsaken in Russia, he entrusts his wife and son to the care of his close friend, Bernhard Rogalski, and returns to Russia to fulfill his Christian responsibility.

Samuel U. Reimer, another visionary in the novel, recognizes that David Epp in his radical commitment to altruistic Christianity has had a tremendous impact upon his son. Young David Epp, Reimer says, has "made his whole life around what he knows his father did . . . . Just that, knowing his father went back when no one in the world could say he had to" (p. 172). Because of David Epp's example, Samuel Reimer himself has come to recognize that his Christian obligation extends beyond the limits of his immediate family and that he will probably be a better father to his children if he gives himself in service to others than if he works a whole lifetime "just so our family has it softer" (p. 170). The recognition of several visionaries in the novel that mere self-preservation is not a distinctly Christian mode of action constitutes a pungent criticism of the Russian Mennonites's belief that all their migrations have been prompted by radical faith.

Not only does Blue Mountains of China expose as untrue the general view that Russian Mennonites have most often emigrated because of faith, but it explores the nature of true Christian discipleship in such a way that the whole quest for a promised land in which to live the Christian faith in peace comes into question. George Williams demonstrates that the "quest for the wilderness as a place of refuge prepared for the true Church persecuted by the world . . . is a

basic impulse in the history of many branches and institutions of Christianity."[6] This quest for a promised land somewhere across the blue mountains of China, or Canada, is an escape from the radical involvement in the hurts of the world that is the task of Christians.

The novel does not rigidly condemn all who have emigrated in search of a peaceful place to live their beliefs. Just before he dies, Johann Friesen vindicates his decision to move from Canada to Paraguay as an act of faith. He says, "Maybe we were wrong, maybe we were right, but we thought we couldn't raise our children when they took the German and the Bible lessons away in school. Maybe we were wrong, maybe we were right, but we believed it. Here we have land, we have had quiet here; peace and quiet" (p. 148). In this insistence upon following conscience, Johann Friesen is very similar to Samuel U. Reimer; after failing to go to Vietnam, Samuel realizes that his going might not have helped, but that as a Christian he should have done what he believed right (p. 179). Insofar as Johann Friesen has done what he believes right, the novel seems to say, he is justified in having moved. Yet, the peace that Friesen has found is the peace that is merely a lack of conflict, though the peace for which Samuel U. Reimer is searching is that of radical involvement. Before they move to Paraguay, Frieda Friesen thinks that her father's having a stroke is a "clear sign" that they should not move (p. 48). This premonition seems to suggest that Johann's motivation for moving is not Christian. Frieda knows that to live in one place is as good as to live in another because external peace will not come until she meets her Lord (p. 149).

The most explicit rejection of the Mennonite quest for the

promised land in the novel--and perhaps less convincing because of its didacticism--is John Reimer's. He says that the trouble with Mennonites is that "they've always wanted to be Jews. To have land God had given them for their very own, to which they were called . . ." (p. 227). In their quest they have attempted to find a land where they can set up a pure Mennonite church, "a church that can never change no matter where on earth or in what century it is, a church that's never as important to us as living, as eating, as making our pile, that's there a few hours a Sunday and maybe a committee meeting during the week to keep our fire escape polished, to keep us decent as our parents all told us" (p. 215). Mennonites, except for the few visionary ones, have forgotten the real message of Christ; he does not call people to continue perpetually searching for the promised land, but rather to live, wherever they are, as Christ taught "by trusting people . . . by serving . . . by forgiving . . . by sharing . . . by loving . . . by suffering" (p. 215). Not only is no place on earth perfect, but the very quest to withdraw into a peaceful enclave is a betrayal of Christian discipleship. Rather than search for the nonexistent Canaan, Mennonites must live the way of Christ wherever they are. Only the visionaries such as David Epp and his son, Frieda Friesen, and the Reimer brothers fully recognize the radical nature of their calling.

Using the raw materials of Russian Mennonite history, then, Wiebe in Blue Mountains of China reinterprets the "facts" to arrive at a new understanding of that history.

Wiebe's Historical Fiction as a Reinterpretation of the "Facts" of Western Canadian History

In his stories based upon Western Canadian history, one of Wiebe's central concerns is again to look at the "facts" in a new way. "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" is not only a brilliant study of the nature of the historical imagination in fiction, but it is also a reinterpretation of the "facts" in the story of Almighty Voice. An Indian who in 1895 shot the North West Mounted Police officer attempting to recapture him after he had escaped from prison, Almighty Voice subsequently led an Indian group in resistance, but was defeated and killed by a large troup of white policemen and volunteers in a last stand on the Minnechinass Hills of Saskatchewan in 1897. Although the narrator ostensibly restricts himself to reporting undisputed bits of historical evidence, he repeatedly tends towards interpretation.

In his listing of the various historical "evidences," the contrast between the honor that white Canada has accorded its heroes and the ignominy it has forced upon the Indians is repeatedly apparent. The seven-pound cannon that was used against Riel in 1885 and against Almighty Voice in 1897 has carefully been refinished by "charmen and women [who] have used nationally advertised cleaners and restorers" (p. 114), but one of the rifles reputedly used by Almighty Voice is in contrast spotted and discolored. Although the graves of at least three of the four whites whom Almighty Voice killed can easily be located and the encomiastic inscriptions on the gravestones read, the graves of Dublin, Going-Up-To-Sky, and Almighty Voice cannot be found. Similarly, the pictures of white heroes such as Sergeant Colebrook, who was shot in the attempted arrest of Almighty Voice,

are available, but no pictures of the Indian heroes, and the authenticity of Almighty Voice's picture is questionable. From the narrator's review of the historical "evidences," the fact that the history of Western Canada as it is commonly interpreted is really only that history from the white point of view is obvious.

How differently the same "facts" can be seen from different points of view is most apparent in the two "official" descriptions of Almighty Voice. Not only do these descriptions conflict, but each of them conflicts with what is thought to be the Indian's photograph. The scar of the written descriptions is not apparent in the picture, and instead of wavy hair the photograph reveals "two straight braids" (p. 118). That point of view makes the crucial difference in the interpretation of historical phenomena is clear in the contrast between the historian's view of Almighty Voice as having a "feminine appearance" (p. 118) and the narrator's view that "no believed face is more <u>man</u> than this face" (p. 119). Though it is not officially recorded in any historical records, the narrator hears the racist refrain,

> Hey Injun you'll get
> hung
> for stealing that steer
> Hey Injun for killing that government
> cow you'll get three
> weeks on the woodpile Hey Injun . . . (p. 120).

The story for the narrator is not about the heroism of the white constable and his fellow aggressors who were destined to conquer the land from the start, but about the Indian warriors who were ignominiously crushed in the process. For the narrator the "wordless

cry" of Almighty Voice reverberates over and informs the story.

"The Fish Caught in the Battle River" also exposes as false some of the clichés in the white understanding of Western Canadian history. In the story, Dan, an old white man, recollects his experiences of 1885 when, during a wagon train run from Swift Current to Battleford, a sizable Indian band intercepted the group, but soon after capitulated their hostages to the white leader, Middleton. Despite his attributing blood-thirsty instincts to these Indians in the usual white manner, Dan realizes that "they'd been eating a bit pinched for a while and our heavy wagons looked real good to them" ("Fish," 33). He realizes also, as white history seldom recognizes, that the whites had dealt very harshly with the natives. Colonel Otter had recently ordered a "little skirmish at Cut Knife Hill . . . of attacking a sleeping Indian camp of over half women and children . . ." (34). Thus, the motives of the Indians in attacking the caravan are clearly not mere love of violence, but rather hunger and retaliation for the aggressive attacks of the whites.

When at the trial of Poundmaker General Middleton asks the chief "why he had taken up arms and murdered innocent settlers," he replies that "he had murdered nobody and had defended himself when attacked at dawn which he thought he was entitled to do" (37). Ironically the white aggressors, who have not only taken away the Indians's world but have also massacred entire Indian villages, pass moral judgment upon the Indians, who have merely defended their own homes against takeover. That the whole ugly mess of Indian-white quarrels originates in fact with the whites is clear because when the Indians surrendered to Middleton, they turned in "two wagons piled

up with guns and rifles, every kind ever sold by the Hudson Bay Company in two hundred years, flintlocks to sixteen bore single barrelled to fourteen shot Winchesters" (37). If Middleton wins the case against Poundmaker, he wins because he is more powerful and not because he is right. Middleton's accusing Poundmaker of "high treason" is as ludicrous as the chief's counter-charge accusing Middleton of "throwing sticks at the Queen and trying to knock her hat off" (37). Thus, Wiebe in this story categorically rejects the tacit assumption of white history that the whites are the "good guys" and the Indians the "bad guys."

How to present the "facts" is also a central concern in Temptations of Big Bear. As Wiebe explains in a headnote to the novel, the material for the story is historically accurate in the sense that none of the characters, dates, or events have been invented (Big Bear, [p. 4]). But the interpretation of these historical materials in the novel is unique, for Wiebe attempts to see that history from the Indians's point of view. The story of the "opening up" of the Canadian West that, from the whites's point of view, is the glorious story of the indomitable pioneers is, from the Indians's point of view, anything but glorious. Rather it is the story of promises made by the white newcomers but not kept, of hardship and starvation, and--although the novel's ending poetically promises a new day--of the death of a culture.

The fundamental difference between the whites and the Indians's interpretations of Western Canadian history is very apparent in their different understandings of the land. Governor Dewdney remarks that the prairie is "all so vast, so laid out in unending curving lines

that you can begin to lose the sense of yourself in relation to it" (p. 114). In the white view, the ordering of this land by throwing railway lines across it, building roads, and creating cities is most desirable. White history has always assumed as its value this domination and exploitation of the "wilderness." By contrast, the Indians value freedom and a close relationship with the land. In the Indian view, therefore, the train is a worm belching smoke and destroying land as it crawls west. The ultimate depravity is, as Big Bear knows, the domination of the prairie by cutting it up into "unending lines, squares, rectangles . . . [and] buildings" (p. 409). Given the values of the Indian culture, the white exploitation of the West is destructive.

In Temptations of Big Bear Wiebe also exposes specific evils--which white history largely ignores--in the whites's dealings with the Indians. Individuals such as George Dill have cheated the Indians with whom they have traded by making excessive profits of up to two hundred percent on them (p. 220). Big Bear tells Governor Dewdney the story about unscrupulous white traders who traded their horses to Crowfoot's Blackfeet for all their summer robes and then, while the natives were drunk on white whiskey, stole the horses back (p. 143). This story, which Wiebe says is historically accurate,[7] supports Big Bear's contention that the Indian way of stealing horses from each other in a test of manliness is much more honorable than the white way of deceit. Other individuals such as the farming instructor, John Delaney, have taken sexual advantage of Indian women; Big Bear also complains about the "police that lead our women into the bushes" (p. 144). Although Big Bear notes that the police have not shot any

Indians (p. 200), the novel demolishes the Canadian legend of the bravery and absolute fairness of the North West Mounted Police. The narrator explains that

> the North West Mounted Police were not all handsome, clean-cut, and six feet tall. Some told barrack-room stories that would have made a Victorian daughter blush; more got drunk on the whiskey they confiscated. Some were young Canadians wild for adventure, others British regulars looking for jobs when imperial wars were scarce and who believed that the proper job for Indians, as for Untouchables, was to have them sweat polishing high boots (p. 152).

In their treatment of Indians and whites the police are not at all impartial. Big Bear notes that the police have not yet helped retrieve one horse the whites have stolen from the Indians, but if an American or a white says, "'There are some of my horses in the River People's camp,' the police come at once and all the man has to do is point, 'This, that horse is mine,' and the horse is taken at once without any question about where we got him" (pp. 143-44). Such an indictment of the North West Mounted Police is certainly not to be found in centennial-celebration encomiums to their bravery and fairness.

Wiebe also exposes the official government treatment of the Indians as manipulative and unjust. The lofty claims that Governor Morris makes about the government's concern for the Indians's welfare in signing treaties are mere propaganda. He says, "We are not coming to buy your land [but only to borrow it]. It is a big thing, it is impossible for a man to buy the whole country, we came here to make certain it is kept for you" (p. 199). Yet, from the start Morris

knows that these noble claims are pretense, and thanks God "that despite everything done in the name of brotherhood, the Queen, the Great [Spirit] . . . others would have to concern themselves with the continuing justice of it . . ." (p. 10). When finally Governor Dewdney manages to get Big Bear to sign treaty, he succeeds largely because he offers the Indians whiskey with the dual intention of getting them slightly tipsy and stressing the ceremonial aspect of the occasion. Big Bear's story of how the Indians used to make treaty underlines the deceitfulness of the Governor's method. That the lofty treaty promises are propaganda is obvious because almost none of them are honored after the treaties have been signed. Big Bear points out that the oxen the government promised have not arrived, the grain has not been given, the grist mill has not been built, and the seed has not come (p. 202). Morris's pretensions that the treaty signifies only the whites's borrowing the land is absurd, Big Bear knows, because "all I see is the little piece of land I must choose and then never leave unless some Farm Instructor says I can go. What is that, when I must have the mark of such a thing on paper to walk on the land they have borrowed?" (p. 199). Seen from the Indian point of view the signing of treaties seems nothing more than a deceitful way of enslaving the natives.

Fundamentally, of course, Temptations of Big Bear is a reinterpretation of the white view of Big Bear's place in Western Canadian history. White history generally accepts--although the vindication of Louis Riel is by now popular--that Big Bear "sided with Louis Riel in the North West Rebellion of 1885" and that his later conviction of treason-felony was just.[8] In Wiebe's novel, Big Bear is an astute

leader who recognizes that the only hope for the Indians lies in unity and that to fight the whites, despite his own emotional inclination to do so, would be folly because of their superior technology and manpower. Although he is not at all a pacifist, Big Bear repeatedly opposes any attempts by the other chiefs or his own braves to instigate war. Having lost his power over his young warriors, however, Big Bear cannot prevent violence and bloodshed.

Big Bear's trial in the novel exposes most clearly the erroneous bias of white history, which assumes that because such Indian leaders as Big Bear were convicted of treason they were in fact guilty.[9] Against the witness of numerous people that Big Bear did not actively support the uprisings, the crown can adduce only the hopelessly biased Indian-hater Simpson who, though he knows no Cree, claims he heard Big Bear incite his people to war. Because of his cultural bias, Magistrate Richardson ignores the defense lawyer Robertson's insistence that "the Indian, apart from his little band, cannot live. . . . His life is his band . . ." (p. 382). Richardson's stipulation that Big Bear is guilty of treason even if he was only present among the insurrectionists ignores completely the cultural differences between Indians and whites. By his masterful arrangement of the trial proceedings, Wiebe demonstrates the gross unfairness of Big Bear's conviction.

Although Wiebe does not present the whites only negatively in the novel, even the "good" whites appear to be less than good from the novel's Indian perspective. Thus, missionary John McDougall who gives his whole life to the Cree is nevertheless a traitor; because his ultimate commitment is to flag and country, he cannot help but participate in the destruction of the Indian culture. Similarly,

Governor Dewdney who has a surprising sensitivity towards Big Bear's world view is finally committed to the opposing view. Kitty McLean is the most likable white character in the novel, and she is that primarily because of her spiritual identification with Big Bear and his world view. From the whites's point of view such men as John McDougall, Governor Dewdney, and John Delaney are great pioneers, but from the Indians's point of view they are participants in the destruction of the old ideals and way of life.

Wiebe's Historical Fiction as an Exploration of Today

Largely because of his Christian perspective Wiebe regards history as meaningful. Christianity, asserts George Grant in Time as History, sees mankind as historical and holds that the study of history reveals who man is.[10] This belief that history reveals man's identity is apparent in Wiebe's remark that the past is relevant because it is part of each person's present ("Cameron Interview," p. 23). Thus, Wiebe's use of historical rather than contemporary materials does not indicate merely an antiquarian interest in the past, but an interest in today. Before a people can know who it is today, it must know who it was in the past.

A leitmotif in Blue Mountains of China is, as the epigraph indicates,

> the knowledge of
> our origins, and where
> we are in truth,
> whose land this is
> and is to be (Blue Mountains, [p. 2]).

On one level the novel re-creates the origins of one significant ingredient in Canada's ethnic mélange, and in so doing helps to define Canada. This is one of Wiebe's central concerns in his Indian fiction as well. In his interview with Melnyk, Wiebe insists that Indian history is an important and almost totally overlooked aspect of Western Canadian history. White tradition in the West is, Wiebe says, "awfully short. What we have to do is dig up the whole tradition, not just the white one, in artifacts and in vestiges [of the past], in the way people live to this day. It's not a recorded tradition, it's a verbal one" ("Melnyk Interview," p. 6).

In Peace Shall Destroy Many Thom bemoans the lack of white Canadian awareness of Indian history, but Pete Block displays the usual white prejudices when he replies, "If you look at what's left on the reserve, we haven't missed much. A couple o' them came to buy eggs yesterday. Told Papa they were out digging seneca roots. This morning we were missing five chickens. Just a bunch of thieves now" (Peace, p. 83). But after Thom has heard Madeleine Moosomin, Big Bear's great-granddaughter, tell him the stories of the great Plains Cree Chief and his people, he "glimpsed the vast past of Canada regarding which he was as ignorant as if it had never been: of people that had lived and acted as nobly as they knew and died without fear" (p. 111). Knowing that Madeleine has a noble past, Thom comes to recognize her, for a few moments at least, as a person.

One of Wiebe's intentions in telling stories from Canadian Indian history is to kindle among other Canadians such a consciousness as Thom acquires. After Big Bear's peroration before the court, his only plea is that "the court . . . print my words and scatter them among

White People" (Big Bear, p. 400). In reinterpreting the "facts" of Indian history, then, Wiebe attempts to portray the origins of the first Canadians so that others can appreciate them for who they really are. As W. H. New suggests, "An awakened sensitivity to the significance of the indigenous Canadian cultures" obviously parallels the discovery of Canadian identity and contributes to any "genuine national folk consciousness."[11]

On another level, Wiebe's historical fiction is a definition of specific peoples through an exploration of their origins. Georg Lukács defines a "real historical novel" as "one which would rouse the present, which contemporaries would experience as their own prehistory."[12] In focusing upon the Russian Mennonites's experience of wandering in Blue Mountains of China, Wiebe has told a story that has long dominated their consciousness. That he has, in Lukács's terms, told it well is clear from the response of many Mennonite readers who have experienced the novel as a story of their own origins. Kenneth Reed says he likes Blue Mountains of China very well "because that's our story he's telling";[13] David Toews proclaims that "our history is a history of fragments . . . . Wiebe has gathered up the fragments . . . . One would think that, gathering fragments from so many diverse places--from Winnipeg to Siberia to South America--Wiebe should be left with a patchwork quilt. But truly we are all of the same cloth."[14] A feeling of community and peoplehood emerges especially in the novel's final chapter. Elizabeth [Driediger] Cereno feels an identification with Jakob Friesen IV, he with John Reimer, and they all understand Dennis [Willms] Williams.

Yet, the greatest contribution of this novel to the Russian

Mennonites's self-understanding occurs through Wiebe's reinterpretation of the historical "facts." As Herbert Butterfield argues, the historical novel can itself become "a power in history, an impulse to fine feeling, and a source of more of the action . . . which it describes. The historical novel itself becomes a maker of history."[15] Insofar as Blue Mountains of China exposes the fallacy of the legend that all Russian Mennonite migrations have been prompted by faith and also portrays visionary Mennonites who have not succumbed to the chimerical attractiveness of the blue mountains, it is an important step towards redefining who Mennonites are today.

For any culture that is seeking its identity a knowledge of and a pride in its own origins is essential. Canadian Indians, many of whom know nothing about their past except perhaps the white misconception that they are the "bad guys" of the television western or the "drunken bums" of the prairie depression novel, must in Wiebe's view know that they are more than that ("Melnyk Interview," pp. 3-4, 10). In First and Vital Candle Josh Bishop emphasizes to the Ojibwa their illustrious past in the attempt to get them to transcend the degradation of their present (Candle, p. 272). And one of Wiebe's achievements in Temptations of Big Bear is surely that he depicts the Indians as a people that can look back upon proud times in its past. This portrayal is not a call for them to return to primitive ways for that is, even if romantically desirable, impossible. It is rather the assertion of their peoplehood that must precede any recovery of cultural vitality. Specific themes, such as Big Bear's call for unity among all Indians, are obviously topical in today's redefinition of cultural roots among Canadian Indians. But the awareness the novel brings that the Indians

have in the past had a dynamic culture with a strong sense of transcendent reality, intimate ties with the land, a genuine sense of community, and of course great leaders such as Big Bear is crucial to the recovery of peoplehood among Indians.

Wiebe's Historical Fiction as Story

Walter Benjamin says that the storyteller in his use of history is "not concerned with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world" (p. 96). History books can give glimpses of facts and public records, but historical fiction can give the felt texture of life. The writer of fiction who is creative in his sympathies can feel the spirit of a past age and then, by imaginatively re-creating historical events, get much closer to the "truth" than by attempting to render an accurate snapshot. He can, as Herbert Butterfield indicates, tell the "human story."[16] Wiebe himself recognizes this as his real purpose in his historical fiction because he says, "How much you mix actual fact and fancy is not so important as that the whole move us to understand 'what happened' in a profounder human way" ("Introduction," Story-Makers, p. xiv).

One of Wiebe's remarkable achievements in his historical fiction is that he largely succeeds in this attempt. In Blue Mountains of China he certainly captures the spirit of the Russian Mennonite people in their diversity and human complexity. Frieda Friesen in her primitive involvement with everyday activities, elemental contact with the rhythms of the land, and unshakable faith in God embodies much of what is best in Russian Mennonite experience. Although he suffers

great harshness, Jakob Friesen IV learns to feel and believe during his Siberian exile in a way he never has before. His son Jakob V, on the other hand, breaks under the pressure of the destruction of all he has learned to be meaningful. Anna Friesen and Elizabeth [Driediger] Cereno both see the possibility of transcending narrow tradition; though Anna seems to fail and Elizabeth to succeed, Anna finds meaning in her traditional life and Elizabeth at the end recognizes her continued involvement with her past. Despite intense struggle, David Epp chooses to return to Russia in faithfulness to his Christian vision of discipleship. Samuel U. Reimer arrives at a dynamic new understanding of Christian commitment, though he cannot effect it. On the other hand, his brother John symbolically carries his cross wherever he is. Not mere voices in an historical pageant, Wiebe's characters in Blue Mountains of China are living people who come through their experiences with various degrees of success or failure.

Rather than depict the broad sweep of great historical events, Wiebe captures universal human experience in the particular. Franz Epp's personal encounter with the "black vulture" becomes the shadow that has followed the Mennonite people ever since. The wife of Jakob Friesen IV who, despite her prayers, loses her husband in Moscow becomes those who have suffered greatly. Her experience demonstrates Frieda's contention that "some things in this world only God has to understand" (p. 147). Anna Friesen becomes those who glimpse the possibility of life beyond tradition, but find fulfillment in it nevertheless. The reinterpretation of the "facts" and exploration of origins take place within the context of the

particular. Thus, Wiebe explores the theme of wandering in the specific moves of Frieda Friesen's family, David Epp's village, Liesel Driediger and her community. From the particular stories emerges the total experience of the Russian Mennonite people.

In his Indian historical fiction too Wiebe focuses upon specific stories and in so doing tells the human story. "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan" is an evocation of the hasty reversals of joy and pain that young Siksika warriors experienced during a surprise attack upon the Plains Cree. At the same time, it is a moving story of the narrator's love for Otat-to-ye's sister. Going into the battle, the narrator knows that as a young warrior with coups at his belt he "needed to fear nothing, certainly not to ask for a girl since everyone knows a warrior needs a wife to keep his lodge" ("Along," 49). Yet, the attack is unsuccessful and the narrator must leave the badly wounded Otat-to-ye to die. Ironically when he returns to their main camp, therefore, he must suffer the pain of telling his loved one that her brother has died rather than enjoy her as he had anticipated. This is the story of elemental human experience.

Although "The Fish Caught in the Battle River" is historical in the sense that it gives the names and numbers of specific events, it is remarkable for its emphasis upon the human elements rather than the official records. The narrator, Dan, remembers the human impact of past events—"a long dripping fish or the dust on this girl's ankle where her moccasin was cut through to her brown skin--dust, or grease on the top of long hair--but hardly ever names that didn't get written up from that time. Or numbers" ("Fish," 33). Recalling

his captivity, Dan remembers numerous specific examples of kindness shown him by the Indians. Once when he went for a drink at the stream an old squaw stopped him, rubbed his open hand over her forehead, and smiled at him all the while (36). During one of the nights Dan found himself without a blanket, and when an Indian guard noticed this he brought Dan "a beautiful rabbitskin blanket . . ." (36). Even when the Indians received word that Dumont had been defeated and had decided to capitulate to Middleton, they remained generous to their captives. The squaws and children looked curiously at them as though pitying them in their error, for Dan recalls that "one old squaw who was poor and alone with all she had tied on the back of a spotted dog let me know she was sorry for me" (37). How Dan personally experienced the historical events constitutes the human story. Rather than mere enemies, the Indians have become people for Dan and for the reader.

In Temptations of Big Bear Wiebe's faithfulness to historical events and names at some points tends towards an unnecessary diffuseness. Some of the peripheral people and events are not well integrated into the larger pattern. But the major characters are richly human individuals rather than mere voices in an historical pageant. John McDougall and Governor Dewdney each has his own particular idiosyncrasies; the Canadian volunteer is a boorish lout. But at the center of the novel is the life of the Indian peoples, and particularly Big Bear. Sitting in council, enjoying a meal with the other chiefs or a pipe, enjoying the warmth of his wives's bodies, Big Bear lives in the full circle of life until that is broken by the white intrusion. It is only symbolically recovered when, at the end of the novel, he achieves again oneness with life.

Thus, although Wiebe's historical fiction is a reinterpretation of the "facts" from his Christian perspective and an exploration of today, it is also story in the sense that it is concerned with particular human experience.

CHAPTER V

WIEBE'S CRAFTSMANSHIP AS STORYTELLER

Although the storyteller gives moral counsel to his reader, he does so subtly and avoids forcing the insights upon his audience. "It is half the art of storytelling," Walter Benjamin theorizes, "to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. . . . It is left up to him [the reader] to interpret things the way he understands them . . ." (p. 89). On the other hand, in John Killinger's view of Christian art, "that literature is undoubtedly best which presents most fully the spiritual presence of Christ himself."[1] That is, from the Christian point of view as Killinger sees it, the criterion of literary merit is not artistic form, but message.

Wiebe in his theory of fiction is committed first to story, and only secondly to illumination in story. As a Christian, he attempts to tell a good story and his Christian world view if it is genuine, he believes, will then be apparent. Despite Wiebe's prior commitment to story, his work embodies a fundamental tension between storyteller and preacher. At times, particularly in the early fiction, the dialogue and characterization are rendered ineffective by a heavy didacticism. But Wiebe has an ability to get into the minds of his characters, and in his sometimes highly poetic prose and his effective use of metaphor and symbol emerges as a gifted storyteller.

Theological Imposition upon Dialogue and Character in Wiebe's Early Novels

Professor Jack Thiessen in an essay entitled "Canadian Mennonite Literature" calls Wiebe an "artist of note," but argues that his "proselytizing theology" invariably gets in the way of his artistic intentions.[2] If this criticism is too categorical, it is nevertheless applicable to certain sections of Wiebe's first two novels, Peace Shall Destroy Many and First and Vital Candle, in which dialogue and characterization suffer at the expense of the moral intention. A Mennonite painter, Bob Regier has suggested that "significant communication [in art] both reveals and conceals. . . . Overeagerness to reveal destroys the very power of the content that begs revealing. Art for religion often becomes inept because of its attempt to resolve this paradox."[3] Sometimes, in his early fiction especially, Wiebe depicts characters as being either exceptionally good or unusually bad rather than moderately good or bad as people actually are. In these instances Wiebe's Christian vision damages the story.

In Peace Shall Destroy Many one of the most important characters in terms of the novel's themes, Joseph Dueck, is one of the least convincing. Thom's gradual movement from thoughtless acceptance of tradition to a recognition of the true nature of Christian discipleship is a movement from the world of Deacon Block and his son Pete to the ideals of teacher Dueck. But Joseph is often not so much an integral part of the action as a mouthpiece for the right responses. Dialogue, then, becomes exposition rather than credible conversation. This is apparent when he warns Thom to avoid Block's pitfalls:

"You live so differently here from most Mennonites. If you

> could get out to see for yourself. At least you use modern machinery and wear ordinary clothes: you haven't fallen into the pitfalls of some Mennonites who almost equate Christianity with a certain cut and colour of clothes, prayer caps and beards, but if you keep on insisting on the German language and tie your belief to cultural expressions, I wonder (Peace, p. 69).

Similarly Joseph's letter, or rather epistle, to Thom is a thinly disguised explanation of the novel's themes. Besides relating some news about his work, Joseph explains the Biblical meaning of Thom's name, condemns as useless a Christian witness that confines itself to words about being "saved," elaborates the different meanings of "peace," and urges Thom to patch his feud with Herb Unger. To present any near-perfect character convincingly in fiction is difficult, and Wiebe largely fails with Joseph.

The dialogue in the scene where Thom and Annamarie meet by the river is also wooden. In their conversation about conscientious objection, Annamarie is little more than a spokesperson for Joseph's viewpoints. She echoes Joseph's questioning when she asks, "can a Christian cast off responsibility by mere refusal--by mere avoidance?" (p. 46). That Annamarie and, later, Thom should become enamored of a charismatic leader such as Joseph is believable. But Annamarie never does become a well-rounded, individualized character in the novel.

In First and Vital Candle the exemplary characters, Josh and Lena Bishop and Sally Howell, are not entirely credible either. Josh, in his harangue of Marsden about nonresistance, becomes a mouthpiece

for Anabaptism. This is obvious, for example, when he preaches,

> Read about any primitive society: love is essential for growth--because, I believe, it is part of the very stuff of our creation. We all see it for children, but we don't for grown-ups because grown-ups can so much more easily return evil for trust, hate for love, whatever selfish reasons they may have. But Jesus Christ said that the only way to overcome enemies is to love their hate, their ambition, to death (Candle, p. 241).

Bishop's wife, Lena, is virtually a nonentity in the novel. After the debate among Josh, Marsden, and Abe about military involvement, she conveniently returns from the kitchen, where she has overheard the talk, to add her bit of saintly advice.

The Bishops and Sally when they expound their beliefs are largely unconvincing, but when they live them are much more believable. Josh's intervention at Bjornesen's store during the brawl, and Sally's teaching the Indian children are more effective artistically than their exposition of theology. The conversation between Abe and Sally at the cabin is convincing as long as they are joking about their newly discovered love for each other, but her careful definition of grace seems an imposition. "Peripherally," she says, "[grace] means God's favor to man, who's done everything not to deserve that; and included in it is the power to make a man pleasing in God's sight, holy as he is. It is the most vital essence in the world" (p. 316). Sally's speaking about grace is certainly not as satisfying as her in a sense being grace to the Indian children and to Abe. She remains, finally, a flat, one-dimensional character.

Wiebe in his characterization of ideal characters in Blue Mountains of China has largely transcended the limitations inherent in his earlier novels. All the visionaries, with the possible exception of young David Epp, appear in the novel not as static perfect people, but as fallible individuals in the process of becoming. Thus, David Epp determines to return to Russia only after a difficult inner struggle about his Christian responsibility. Samuel Reimer is initially a mediocre farmer and at best only a nominal Christian, and only after a complete conversion becomes a radical disciple of Christ. Similarly, John Reimer develops through his various contacts--with Franz Epp in "Black Vulture," young David Epp in "Wash, This Sand and Ashes," and his brother Samuel--to his mature Christian commitment at the end.

In the novel's final chapter, "On the Way," the preacher in Wiebe emerges, though, as several of John's speeches are rather didactic. His discussion of the proper understanding of discipleship is transparently didactic, for he says,

> . . . the whole idea of Jesus just talking about people being 'saved' and feeling good about it is wrong. Quite wrong. He was alive, on earth to lead a revolution! A revolution for social justice, the terrible question of his day as it is in ours was and is social injustice to the poor, to the racially oppressed, to the retarded and the helpless. Mary said, 'All people will call me blessed because of the mighty things the Mighty God has done for me, he stretched out his mighty arm and scattered the proud people with all their plans, he brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and

> lifted up the lowly, he filled the hungry with good things.' That's the good news Jesus came to bring and do (Blue Mountains, p. 215).

John's rejection of a dual ethic for the Christian, one for Sunday and another for weekdays, and his assertion in the conversation with Dennis Williams that the Christian is obligated to be totally committed to his faith are more convincing. When Williams distinguishes between the Christian's obligation in church and out of it, John responds, "Of course. In business you fly around in airplanes but in church you walk on foot. . . . I'm trying to be consistent, if you want to keep the picture straight. I'm not flying at all; I walk in everything" (p. 214). Within the context of the dialogue, this concise metaphorical statement is more effective than the longer didactic discussion about discipleship. Despite the fact that John's speech is occasionally didactic, he is more convincing than, for example, Joseph Dueck. One reason for this is that he clearly grows during the novel, and is not as static as Joseph. Furthermore, the few theological speeches in "On the Way" do not bear the full weight of the chapter's meaning. Set within the several concurrent conversations, the few bits of didacticism are not as overbearing as Joseph's speeches. Nevertheless, John Reimer too is more effective as a symbolic figure than as a preacher.

Characterization and Wiebe's Short-story Style

In his interview with Reimer and Steiner, Wiebe says, "I have always looked at myself more as a [short-]storyteller than anything else. In Peace the original idea was a short story--I wrote the death of Elizabeth scene the first year I was writing stories at

U. of A. Certainly First and Vital Candle and Big Bear didn't come from stories, although parts of them lend themselves to story adaptation" ("Life into art," 8). Blue Mountains of China, of course, is a collection of short stories each of which--except perhaps "Wash, This Sand and Ashes"--has, as D. W. Doerksen suggests, "a high degree of internal completeness."[4] Among the four novels, Peace Shall Destroy Many is the most integrated into a linear story line, though several Deacon Block sections themselves comprise unified stories. The flashback technique in First and Vital Candle, and the varied points of view in Temptations of Big Bear suggest a series of insights rather than a simple linear progression. Although to a lesser extent than in Blue Mountains of China, the narrative techniques in these two novels are also such that the collocation of stories represents the whole.

That Wiebe's strength is as teller of short stories elucidates the discussion of his gift of characterization. His dialogue is not always convincing, but his empathy with the inner motivations of diverse characters usually is. In "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" Wiebe depicts convincingly the psychotic killer, and in "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan," the old Siksika reminiscing about his experiences as warrior. In each of the novels--except Blue Mountains of China--only one or two characters dominate the action. Secondary characters are often not well-rounded individuals, but rather caricatures. In Peace Shall Destroy Many, for example, Razia Tantamont is thinly sketched as temptress, "comically wicked, smoking, listening to the 'blaring fox-trot from the radio,' reading The Sun Also Rises."[5] Although Herb Unger as the lazy Mennonite who is ostracized by the

community is credible, his role in the novel is primarily that of carrying on with Thom the feud that culminates in the violence which prompts Thom's new insight into life's meaning. Similarly, Pete Block is a thin character who serves largely as counterpoint against which Thom's progression to insight can be measured, and as the means of inflicting poetic justice upon his father, the Deacon, at the end.

Those secondary characters who are fully realized usually are the main characters in specific short stories within the novels. People such as Oolulik in First and Vital Candle, and John McDougall and Governor Dewdney in Temptations of Big Bear are believable people, but they appear in only one or two episodes. This suggests not that these are not good novels, only that the method is one that presents a series of insights rather than a linear progression in story line and characterization.

Blue Mountains of China exemplifies best Wiebe's special strength as short-story writer with the gift of portraying the inner essences of different characters. Frieda Friesen's "My Life: That's As It Was" is, although separated into four parts that unify the novel, a long short story that effectively evokes the unique experience of an old peasant woman who places her entire being into God's trust. As Bernie Harder contends, those "episodes that revolve around one or two people and a short period of time . . . are clear, detailed, and immediately captivating."[6] Hence, the stories of Jakob Friesen V and Samuel U. Reimer are especially effective. "Sons and Heirs" is a powerful evocation of Friesen's inner transformation from a cocky, joyful son returning home into a broken individual who succumbs to awful violence after his thin moral veneer has broken under the overwhelming pressure.

In "Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer" Samuel's spiritual experience and renewed Christian vision, which because thwarted results in his death, is vividly realized. The story betrays, however, Wiebe's tendency to concentrate on one or two chief characters even in his short stories, and to almost caricature the subsidiary characters. Neither Emily nor the pastor is a well-rounded character. She is most convincing in her tirade about the children's ruining their expensive gloves and in her consciousness of prestige, but a fuller picture of her personality does not emerge. Although he is a facile spokesman for altruistic Christian love, the pastor is one-dimensional as well. Of course, caricature can be an effective means of satire; the pastor's telling Sam that "your idea, it's so wild, just desert your family and—" (p. 177) shows how ludicrous his pretensions about love for all mankind, service, and peace witness are. Despite his tendency to caricature secondary characters, Wiebe does best with short stories that have few characters and a short time span because these allow him to explore in some depth one or two characters.

Wiebe's Portrayal of Major Characters

If at times in his early fiction Wiebe tends to didacticism in dialogue and characterization, one of his greatest strengths as storyteller is nevertheless his ability to represent artistically the inner feelings and motivations of diverse characters. In his interview with Cameron, Wiebe indicates that he accepts the "liberal idea that all human experience is the proper subject for literature . . ." ("Stream," p. 158). Many of Wiebe's most powerful portrayals of character are people who are not obviously dramatic, and yet he often succeeds in presenting them as dynamic, credible people. Among

Wiebe's best characters are such diverse and unlikely individuals as children, Hal Wiens and Liesel Driediger; a psychotic killer with a peculiar blend of Christian fundamentalism and sadism; unsophisticated farm boys, Thom Wiens and Abe Ross, struggling with the existential issues of life; an aging grandmother, Frieda Friesen, who has experienced life deeply but not sensationally; a mediocre farmer, Samuel U. Reimer, who suddenly receives a call from God to declare peace in Vietnam; and a conservative patriotic Methodist missionary, John McDougall, in the Canadian West. The depth of characterization in such diverse people as these indicates a real strength in Wiebe's art. Helga Harder, in a review of First and Vital Candle, describes the "depth and power of his characters' introspections" as "profound and superior,"[7] and this praise can be extended to most of the major characters in Wiebe's fiction.

From among the different kinds of people Wiebe has portrayed in his fiction, one of the weakest is his portrayal of women. Neither Annamarie Lepp in Peace Shall Destroy Many nor Sally Howell in First and Vital Candle is a well-rounded convincingly human character. Though Kitty McLean in Temptations of Big Bear is believable, she appears more in the role of a chorus, defining the reader's moral responses towards Big Bear, than as an individually realized character. In the patriarchal primitive peoples that are the subject of most of Wiebe's fiction, women are, of course, not dominant. The narrator in "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" notes that questioning is impossible for an Indian woman (p. 117); the narrator in "The Well" remarks that for Mennonite women of Schoenbach a stooping posture is considered becoming because "humility is required, humility in keeping

with a bowed head and eyes fixed upon the dust from which all come and to which all must again return when He comes to judge on His mighty throne" (Blue Mountains, p. 98).

With the exception of Kitty McLean, the women whom Wiebe has depicted effectively are all in Blue Mountains of China. The portrayal of Anna Friesen in "The Well" is a gripping story of the freedom from binding tradition that she glimpses briefly at the well, and at the same time a successful evocation of the genuine joy possible to her in her circumscribed role. As she later remembers her momentary vision at the well, Anna--still in Schoenbach--"would smile a little at her baby of that year, a quietness she knew as joy moving within her" (p. 104).

Liesel Driediger's childhood experiences in "Over the Red Line" also take place in the context of the tension between tradition and involvement, but--in contrast to Anna--Liesel pursues the lure of the world beyond the Mennonite community. In fact, her childhood dissatisfaction with long funeral sermons and interest in crossing the intriguing red line are much more successful artistically than her adult conversation with Rachel that is supposed to be intelligent and witty, but falls flat. But when her meeting with Jakob Friesen IV forces her to confront her past, the full impact of the childhood struggle becomes apparent. Simply crossing the "red line" that separates tradition from freedom does not essentially alter her being. As a person struggling with her past and coming to recognize her dependence upon it, Elizabeth is convincing.

Frieda Friesen is certainly the best and most human female character in Wiebe's fiction. In the intensity of her experience

and in the intensity of her faith, she is the epitome of a peasant woman. Despite Wiebe's fairly credible portrayals of Kitty McLean, Anna Friesen, and Liesel Driediger, Frieda is the only woman in his fiction who is as fully realized and multi-dimensional as the major male characters.

In Peace Shall Destroy Many both Thom and Deacon Block are strongly realized individuals. During Thom's gradual development of self-awareness, some of the most convincing parts are his introspections that reveal the subtle nuances of his inner nature. Initially self-righteous in his acceptance of Mennonite tradition, Thom thinks, "Fly, you heathen . . . . Fly low, practise your dips and turns to terrify playing children and grandmothers gaunt in their rocking chairs. Practise your hawk-swoops, so you can gun down some equally godless German or bury a cowering family under the rubble of their home" (Peace, p. 11). The gradual cooling of his friendship with Pete Block is a measure of his growing self-awareness. During the summer Thom reflects, "They had once had such times! They had spent every Sunday last summer together. . . . Where now was that friendship?" (p. 84). Aware of the Church's prejudice against Indians, Thom through his encounter with Herman Paetkau and Madeleine comes to recognize that "despite this summer's work with the breed children . . . he had not yet seen them as quite human" (p. 110). Thom's intimate link with the land, his honest struggling with the existential issues of his Christian faith, his realization of his own imperfection during the fiasco in the barn, and the new dimensions of his Christian commitment he comes to recognize are the facets of a dynamic characterization.

Even more gripping, perhaps because more intense in his convictions, Deacon Block is the most memorable character in the novel. Wiebe's evocation of the two experiences of Block's life that have shaped his nature is sympathetic and powerful. During the war while he was a conscientious objector in the Siberian forestry camps, Block was subjected to a horrible initiation in which the other workers played a game with his life; this experience forcefully taught him that he was "a mere vacancy without a son" (p. 126). After that, work for his son was Block's "only religion" (p. 127), and during the food shortages after the war Block in a towering passion killed a Russian peasant during a quarrel over food for his family, his son. As the founder of Wapiti, the Deacon has attempted to create a peaceful enclave that perpetuates the ways of the forefathers for his children. He is a hard-working gifted man, but at bottom an intensely idolatrous man who seeks to carve the world in his own image. Both Block's initial absolute power over the community and his ultimate fall are entirely convincing given his experiences and his inner motivations that Wiebe captures very well.

The characterization of Abe Ross in First and Vital Candle is also compelling. Although the alternating sections in the novel, which flash increasingly further back into Abe's past, are perhaps not as well integrated into the story line as they might be, they do deepen the characterization. While he is in Winnipeg, Abe is unable to face any but the most superficial memories of his boyhood home in Selkirk. The Tyrel Bay experience demonstrates Abe's empathy with the natives and the reasons for his dislike of white missionaries at Frozen Lake. Although the stream-of-consciousness method in the

flashback to his university and army days is awkward, it does reveal Abe's overwhelming feeling of meaninglessness. These violent experiences, Abe comes to recognize through Sally's probing, have taught him that the "'human dignity' argument" as an explanation for life has no ultimate basis because extreme necessity quickly wipes it out (Candle, p. 210). Not until after he has come to love Sally, however, can he face honestly the destructiveness of his Puritan father's rearing of him. During the flashback to his running away from home, Abe finally confronts the rough edges of his hurts. Only then does he know what he has not faced before: that "success was as essential to him as it had ever been--to my father . . ." (p. 330). Recognizing his own pride and self-dependence and his ultimate meaninglessness (p. 352), Abe is able finally to affirm the desire for newness of life. As just one aspect of Wiebe's characterization of Abe, his coming to terms with his past is largely successful.

Wiebe's greatest artistic achievement in Temptations of Big Bear is, as Victor Doerksen suggests, the powerfully "empathetic inner description" of Big Bear.[8] Having a reverence for the earth and for relationship and an awareness of the metaphysical, Big Bear knows what is truly important in life. He cannot comprehend how the whites can presume to give the Indians a piece of the land on which they have always lived; he tells Governor Morris, "We take what the Earth gives us when we need anything, and we leave the rest for those who follow us" (p. 29). Feasting and smoking with family and friends, Big Bear lives in "the complete circle of living and solid sweet immovable and ever changing Earth . . ." (p. 51). The goodness of earth and sun are for Big Bear intricately tied to the Only One's providence.

He recalls the "year the land was as if The Only One snowed buffalo" (p. 31). But his thankfulness is not only for times past when food was plentiful. Though by the end of the novel he rarely can eat meat any more and must shred his tobacco with bark to make it last, Big Bear prays, "You First One, Spirit of All, you have given food and tobacco once more, we thank you" (p. 335). Though his band has almost disintegrated, he keeps a complete circle of friends about. Big Bear is, as Kitty McLean recognizes, a "Person" not only in the sense of being one of the "River People," but also in the sense of being fully human (p. 313).

More than anyone else, Big Bear recognizes the reality of the dilemma confronting his people. From the beginning he knows that to fight the whites is futile because of their superior technology and more systematic way of fighting. During the council with Sitting Bull and Crowfoot, Big Bear says, "We see we cannot fight them. Fighting is good in raids, and makes men . . . . One only becomes more manly by killing other men and I don't think American soldiers are men: they have deliberately killed too many women and children" (p. 105). Repeatedly during this council (pp. 96, 99, 104), and later during a council with his own band's leaders, Big Bear insists that only by uniting can the Indians effectively oppose the white menace. "We are small here," he says, "we are smaller there, and who hears us? Who stirs in his sleep when a single buffalo runs? But when a herd moves, ahhh--we too must shake the ground, we must speak with one thundering voice . . ." (p. 203). Because the Indians are powerless against the whites's physical strength, Big Bear knows--as Governor Dewdney points out--that only through an exertion of moral power can the natives

influence the whites (p. 117). By speaking with the support of all Indians to "that one Whiteskin than whom there is none higher" (p. 197), he hopes to force the whites to honor their treaty promises and assertions of fairness.

Always his concern is for his people. Until his braves seize all power from him, Big Bear attempts to lead them into a peaceful coexistence with the whites despite the fact that he has already had a vision of six hanged River People (pp. 63-66), and another of coming bloodshed (pp. 129-30). As James Simpson knows, in spite of Big Bear's sincere efforts to save his people, he himself will have to bear the weight of failure (p. 267). Throughout, however, Big Bear retains a faith in the Only One and the land he has given. In the symbolism of his giving the Chief's Son's Hand to several sons in turn and holding it himself as he dies, and of the sun's rising at the end, Big Bear towers above the immediate failures in the novel to affirm that the values and spirit of his people will survive.

One of Wiebe's considerable strengths as storyteller, therefore, is his ability to portray effectively the inner feelings and motivations of the major characters--primitive people who have experienced life deeply.

Wiebe's Facility with Language and Description

Although Wiebe's language is sometimes awkward and rough-edged, often it has the beauty of lyrical poetry.

A Mennonitism such as "cats" or "shoot" is appropriate for Samuel Reimer, but not necessarily for Abe Ross. In First and Vital Candle, such awkward words as "verbalizable" (p. 47), phrases as

"grace note to her coiffure" (p. 17), and too-often-repeated words as "hunkered down" (pp. 74, 81, 170, 309) occasionally mar the story. A similar awkwardness is apparent in the conversation of the Williams family in Blue Mountains of China in which Wiebe attempts to capture contemporary speech patterns. Irene, for example, says, "Hey o poppo, are you finished already?" (p. 198) and "Poppo my poppo . . . you must fire your chauffeur with a monstrous fire for he hath abused me!" (p. 199). And Charles exclaims, "Macaroni, watch those big flying feet!" (p. 198).

Although Wiebe's rendition of conversational language is sometimes weak, he has a remarkable ability to transpose foreign speech rhythms into English. One of the weaknesses in Peace Shall Destroy Many, which Wiebe ascribes to Professor Salter's advice ("Cameron Interview," pp. 36-37), is the sterile English and absence of any genuine Mennonite-German idiom. When it is there, it is unconscious. For example, when Thom corrects his brother's English, he himself adds a Mennonite expression: "The pinto wasn't on the wagon, it was hitched to it, not?" (p. 15). The "not" ending betrays his Low German background. Generally, however, Thom's language is not indicative of German speech rhythms at all. He tells Pastor Lepp, for instance, "I'm sorry, sir, I just asked the question out of the blue like that. It was rather rude of me. But living here all my life is just the problem. I've grown up here and readily talk about acting in the traditions of the fathers, but when I think about it, I don't really know what that means" (p. 86). Though this is not polished language, it is certainly not the idiom of a Mennonite farm boy.

In Blue Mountains of China, on the other hand, Wiebe largely

succeeds in translating the Low German idiom into English, although sometimes at the expense of clarity. Frieda Friesen introduces herself in the following words: "My father, Isaak J. Friesen, he came from the Jakob Friesen side, village Gnadenfeld, Karatow, South Russia and came to Manitoba single in 1879, always said when I first screeched the wind knew right away it was time to make schluss [conclusion]" (Blue Mountains, p. 7). Not only the awkward syntax but the liberal sprinkling of both German and Low German words--though German-English dictionaries are readily available, Low German-English ones are not--make this difficult reading for those who do not know these languages. Wiebe should surely have provided a glossary to help the readers.

The Frieda Friesen sections are the most consistently good representations of German idiom in English. But Emily Reimer, Sam's wife, also speaks in a German-sounding idiom when she tells Sam, "Well I tell him and tell him and that's true, but he's more like you every day, if he hears me I can't tell it from what he does" (p. 160). Samuel himself uses characteristically Mennonite expressions such as "cats," "somewheres," and "anyways," but generally his language has a less translated quality than Emily's. The description of Sam's vision of violence in surrealistic terms seems strangely inappropriate. In a paragraph beginning with a Mennonitism, the narrator suddenly describes Sam as wanting "to swallow and swallow again and again, have green rhinos explode in his brain, ravaging pink trees and playing their horns like golden blazing angels. Crackerjack" (p. 158). In the final chapter Wiebe uses such expressions as "na [well]" and "Onkel [uncle]" to suggest German idiom, and again the effect is not as convincing as in the case of Frieda's language. Of course, Canadian

Mennonites in "On the Way" have largely adopted English so that the less distinctively German idiom there is appropriate.

In Part Two of First and Vital Candle, the story of Abe Ross's Arctic experience, the "highly formal English used to describe the natives' speech is brilliantly indicative that they are using another language."[9] Oelulik, for example, says, "They are without breath in the snow houses, Itooi also. Only the baby" (p. 77). In Temptations of Big Bear, too, the speech of Big Bear has a flowing lyrical quality that suggests not only Big Bear's gift for oratory, but also the flowing nature of the Cree language. During his last speech to the council, he says,

> All those South People heard of Big Bear: he was head chief of the River People and the sacred Chief's Son's Hand hung behind his lodge and the sound of his name breathing down the wind stretched their hearts on the ground like dried meat. When I said anything, the People listened; when I would not take treaty there up the valley, you were happy. But now, I say one thing and you do another. You remember my vision, but you turn your backs (Big Bear, p. 288).

In this lyrical passage Wiebe successfully uses English to suggest a translated quality.

Over against occasional roughness in language, Wiebe at times achieves poetic beauty in his descriptions. The description of the Wapiti barns in winter is striking:

> Now barns seeped cold, thick straw-sheds gave no protection. Bunched together, the stock crouched inside their heavy hides, stiffening, or stumped across the squawking snow to watering,

> stirred only by the desperate beating of men. The trough-heaters, under prodding pokers, plumed smoke into the air; without them each pail of water had spread solid in the trough. Every breath drew a knife-wound down the throat. No one thought of the howling blizzard now. The men, dumping hay in mangers and heaping straw under the bellies of their stock, knew that the silent malignancy was far more deadly (Peace, pp. 166-67).

Besides being a vivid description of the physical aspects of winter, this is also a significant evocation of the malignancy that is destroying Wapiti in its spiritual winter.

In First and Vital Candle, too, the outdoor scenes frequently have a poetic beauty. The description of the night during Abe's run on his skis is sharp: "From the mass of the land behind him a wolf answered, so near it seemed the animal breathed at his neck and he looked around, skin stirring on his back as from the stroke of a long cold finger. Only the land, rocks and trees snow-heaped, impersonal and gigantically cold, loomed like an immense fist thrust into the darkness, shaping a darkness all its own" (Candle, p. 217). Going to the cabin together, Sally and Abe enjoy the beauty, and the description of the scene evokes it well. Together "they looked down the great curve of the ice-scrambled rapids falling out of sight between white-splashed pines gleaming bronze in the sunlight: as if the frost had seized the water lashing the rocks and petrified it with one clenching of its iron fist" (pp. 277-78). A rugged beauty appropriate to the rough edges of Wiebe's theme characterizes this prose.

Wiebe's imagery is often strikingly poetic. During Elizabeth Block's funeral, the "wind stirred as they stepped through the gate, lifting the hair on the bare heads of the men, swirling a twist of dead leaves about their feet" (Peace, p. 155). After his visit to Sally's grave, it seems to Abe that the "clouds tumbled like greyish toys neglected after play" (Candle, p. 354). Each of these images is an effective evocation of the emptiness that death brings.

After Jakob V's return to his parents's farm, images of death and sterility dominate. He finds at home that the "house was a black hole. Black. . . . No one on the road, not a figure the length of the village street, not a dog barking, no team moving in the fields. Not one movement in the sunlight" (Blue Mountains, p. 13). Later when he draws water "the green scum slopped out of the trough," and in the house he "watched the [spinning] wheel revolve its complaint, drily, the thick string tug at [Muttachi's] knobby fingers" (p. 25). The imagery suggests how awful the lifeless scene seems to Jakob V, but perhaps also points to the spiritual bankruptcy of the Mennonites who have fled. In Temptations of Big Bear, just prior to the massacre at Frog Lake, Terry Gowanlock "stood for some time as a red shaft of sunlight suddenly cut across her pale blue mantle so that it too seemed to burn . . ." (Big Bear, p. 241). This image is richly suggestive of the holocaust about to hit Frog Lake.

Metaphor and Symbol in Wiebe's Fiction

One of Wiebe's greatest strengths as storyteller is his adeptness at using metaphor and symbol to reinforce theme. In so doing he transcends the limitations of didacticism.

In Peace Shall Destroy Many, the division of the novel into four movements corresponding to the seasons reinforces effectively Wapiti's progression, especially Thom's, from the hopeful push of spring to the ominous thunderclouds of summer, the migrating geese of autumn, and the cold malignancy of winter. The prelude to the spring section has Jackie Labret and Hal Wiens playing together in the plenteous spring water bursting with life: the boys express a vitality and potential for life the community lacks. Later in the section, Thom and Annamarie meet at the Wapiti River; their "journey to water," as Yolanda Cole argues, promises a break from debilitating tradition--and renewal.[10] After the dissolution of winter in the upheaval at the Christmas program when Wapiti and Thom are at their nadir, Hal Wiens expresses the promise of spring and new life as he says, "Wish it was spring so we could go lookin' for frogs' eggs again" (p. 238). Thom's new realization of his own inner depravity, and his commitment to radical Christian involvement find symbolic expression in Hal's wish.

The central metaphor for Wapiti's isolation is the bush. Early in the novel Thom thinks, "If only there were enough trees and hills and rocks in all Saskatchewan or all Canada or even all the world to hide us from a Hitler . . ." (p. 13). During the school picnic Pete Block says, "It'd be nice to just stay in the bush--never go out" (p. 28), and Thom readily agrees. Later, however, just prior to the arrival of winter, Thom dreams about the destruction by fire of

> the bush that separated Wapiti from the world. . . . He saw the trees like patriarchs, limbs now yearning in petition where they had stood triumphant half a thousand years . . . . Then they blistered in light as fire raced to the tip, and dripped

> orange and blood-red into the black swamp-water as branches dropped hissing down. . . . When he opened his eyes . . . not a tree stood between Wapiti and the world. Only the black spines of the patriarchs humped splintered, broken in dead-fall (pp. 164-65).

At the end of the novel, Hal completes the metaphor when he indicates his realization that the world is not, as he once believed, surrounded by "pines all 'round the edge," but the "world's really round . . ." (p. 238). Using the bush metaphor, then, Wiebe effectively reinforces the transition from isolation to an awareness of the need for involvement in Peace Shall Destroy Many.

One of the central symbols in First and Vital Candle is the parallel between Sally's death with its redemptive effect upon Abe, and Christ's death and resurrection. When Sally asks Abe to take her to the Brink Island cabin on Friday, she notes that the day is Good Friday (Candle, p. 275). Later she explains that "to be our redeemer Jesus had to die today," (p. 282) and further that "Easter follows Good Friday, and that was when Jesus Christ came alive again. He still is" (p. 283). Sometime during the rainfall from Good Friday night until Sunday morning she dies. Her spiritual retreat and death, as Josh Bishop notes, has its first redemptive effect in the baptism of Kekekose and the several other natives, and "it will work on. That's God's mercy" (p. 348). And the crisis her death prompts in Abe is enough to bring his spiritual struggle to fruition. The Christian symbolism of water as having cleansing properties points to the significance of Sally's dying by water. As baptism brings

wholeness, so water in First and Vital Candle brings cleansing and renewal. Though these elements of Christian symbolism jar at times with the naturalistic, almost-adventure-story atmosphere of the novel's denouement, they demonstrate that Wiebe's Christian vision in the novel does not end with Good Friday's pathos, but with Easter's promise.

More effective is Wiebe's use of Bach symbolism to reinforce the themes of the novel. During the party in Winnipeg, Schwafe's playing parts of St. John's Passion underlines, on one hand, the disparity between lofty Christian emotion and the meaninglessness of the revelers's lives and, on the other, the hope Abe and they do have. Schwafe's "heavy off-beat bass . . . such as Bach had never written" (p. 38) points to the guests's discordant, fragmented lives. The piece strikes Abe at his hurt, for "he heard it now, 'Run, run, you souls whom care oppresses--run, run,' the deep voice often ahead of the beat in its urgency, and the whispered upper voices of the chorus, 'Run where? Run where?' And the answer, ever and again, 'To Golgotha'" (p. 37). Though during the Bach concert the last choral of St. John's Passion seems to Abe "beautiful beyond imagination" (p. 25), later when Sally and he listen together to The Well-tempered Clavier he realizes how much more profoundly Sally has understood Bach than he. Abe feels the music's beauty, but Sally has a faith that enables her to understand that

> God's own time is the best,
> is ever best of all.
> In him live we,
> move, and have our being.
> And in him we die at his good time;

When he wills (p. 251).

The irony of her faith that "God's own time is the best" is forcefully apparent after she has died when her Bach tune--"Thou shalt be with me today, / in paradise, in paradise . . ." (p. 349)--reverberates through Abe's mind. And in his own turning to faith, the Bach call to run to Golgotha finds its completion. The invitation comes: "'You have run and hidden far, and you are tired. Turn to me now, come now'?" (p. 353); finally Abe can answer affirmatively. Because better integrated into the action, the Bach symbolism works even more effectively than the Easter symbolism to reinforce First and Vital Candle's central themes.

If Wiebe's use of symbol in his early work shows a weakness, it shows a tendency to explain too much and not to trust the symbols enough. In Peace Shall Destroy Many, in the section entitled "Winter," Thom explicitly compares winter's cruelty towards the snow-buntings with man's experience of winter. He thinks, "Man also--perhaps man even had a spiritual winter" (p. 199). Similarly, Wiebe explains too obviously the symbolism of the names in the novel. Joseph in his letter explains that Thom is "the man whose eyes were open but could not see," and Joseph is the one who was "forced to leave his garments and flee away naked to preserve his unspotted character" (p. 160).

In this respect Wiebe is more artful in the naming of Peter Block and Helmut Wiens, whose names he does not explain. Peter in its New Testament context means "the rock," and Block suggests the Deacon's solidity and blockheadedness. Block's name, then, points to his immovable solidity as the pillar of Wapiti society; in the

Deacon's eventual downfall, of course, the name becomes ironic. The name Helmut, which in German means "bright courage" or "bright spirit," clearly underlines Helmut's role as the embodiment of promise for Wapiti in the novel. Names--such as Biblical ones--the meanings of which are readily available certainly do not require elaborate explanation, but names that carry meaning in a foreign language or in an ethnic context do. Thus, in Blue Mountains of China Wiebe indicates subtly, when Frieda recalls her father's telling her to "just watch out that you're friedlich [peaceful] at school, like your name" (p. 8), that Frieda means "peace," and, when he describes John Reimer as "Canadian Mennonite John Reimer" (p. 197), that he is Canadian Mennonite Everyman. In Samuel U. Reimer's name, the pun upon the "U" emphasizes Wiebe's call to all readers to radical involvement in Christian witness. Thus, Wiebe in his later fiction largely overcomes the occasional tendency in his early work to over-explicitness in his symbolism.

Wiebe's symbolism in Blue Mountains of China demonstrates the sureness of a master. In "Black Vulture" the long deathly black limousine, which brings the GPU who arrest Jakob Friesen IV, becomes a powerful, sinister, demonic symbol of the evil that hounds Frans Epp's imagination in the heart of Moscow as he delivers the petition. From an earlier version of the story in which the "black vulture" is an evil that has haunted Epp personally ever since his experience,[11] Wiebe in the final version extends its evil effect to encompass the Russian Mennonites as a people. Despite his criticism of many Mennonites's motives in seeking to escape Russia, Wiebe does not deny the harshness of the experience in this story any more than in the story of Jakob Friesen IV's Siberian experience or the story

of Jakob V's breakdown.

The red line on the map, in the story of young Liesel Driediger's experiences during the voyage to Paraguay, is an effective symbol for the man-made regulations that separate the world of tradition from the larger world to which Liesel aspires.[12] The line is, as her father says, merely "man-made," and she herself discovers that "it isn't any different . . ." on the other side (p. 85). Retreating beyond the red line really does not make any difference.

In the dryness of the Chaco, the well works on several levels as a symbol of life and hope. Although Wiebe criticizes mere adherence to tradition as the basis of faith, he in a sense recognizes the immediacy of belief that may undergird the following of tradition. Thus, the settlers who named their village Schoenbach [Beautiful Brook] long before the well was found were simply revealing "again their thoughtless faith" (p. 97). This in a sense is Frieda's relationship to belief, for her faith is not falsifiable. In her mind, everything, whether good or evil, comes from God. On another level, the well symbolizes new life only for Anna Friesen, because only she has seen in it the possibility of new life and freedom from the strictures of tradition.

The barn seems to have in Wiebe's fiction both a positive and a negative symbolic function. In "Sons and Heirs," the barn is the place where Jakob V finally succumbs to the lure of physical pleasure with the Russian whore, and to gross violence as his purely traditional faith crumbles under the pressures of the circumstances. Similarly, in Peace Shall Destroy Many the barn is the scene of dissolution and violence as the evil within Wapiti erupts and traditional belief breaks.

At the same time, the barn in both Peace Shall Destroy Many and "All On Their Knees" is symbolic of the Christ who is the means of renewal and existential faith. The conclusion in "All On Their Knees" is in a sense the combination of this dual symbolism as Herman Paetkau, who has fed and clothed the Indian Carbeau and shown him only good will, is inexplicably shot. In that Herman has shown only love towards others, his death merges into the death of the Christ who is not only a baby in the manger, but the crucified Lord.

In Blue Mountains of China, of course, the basic working symbol is that of the blue mountains, which represent the chimerical attractiveness of escape from radical Christian involvement. The theme of the blue mountains appears explicitly first in "Drink Ye All of It" in which the "jagged mountains" of China "smeared to burnished orange in blue" (p. 125). Yet, when David Epp and the group arrive at the mountains, he discovers that in reality they are "black and jagged from here black in the heartless cold nothing like the thin blue sketch, beckoning from across the river the beautiful mocking blue" (p. 126). The belief of David Epp's father that "over every hilltop is peace" (p. 131) is, Epp realizes after he has returned home to Russia in an attempt to help the others, not real. Looking out from his home back in Russia, he thinks that "in the moonlight outside . . . he could see the blue line . . . of the mountains far away, beautiful as they had ever been from there. But he knew now that was only his imagination. Or romantic nostalgia" (p. 140). The true peace of God is, David Epp discovers as do Joseph and Thom in Peace Shall Destroy Many, the peace of immediate Christian involvement wherever you are.

An allusion to the blue mountains theme occurs much earlier in the novel--in "My Life: That's As It Was (2)"--when Frieda reminisces, "the Cypress Hills lay on the prairie like blue dust, far away" (p. 45). Because this clause does not appear in an earlier version of the story[13] and because Wiebe originally considered calling the novel The Blue Hills of China ("Cameron Interview," p. 13), this is clearly an allusion to the blue mountains theme. During her childhood Frieda's family moved to various places in Manitoba, but "it always seemed to have something wrong" (p. 9). After she was married, her own family moved frequently to different places in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and finally Paraguay (pp. 47-48). Yet, Paraguay is no better than any other place; she remarks that the "Russlander had come here to get away from wars and it wasn't two years . . . and there were patrols and searches on every road and planning for flight and their Zentrale [administrative and business center of the colony] . . . was being bombed" (p. 141). The attractive blue dust of the Cypress Hills, Frieda knows, is chimerical. She lives her Christian faith wherever she is, and retains a hope for ultimate peace only after death when she goes to meet her Lord (p. 145).

The pervasive emphasis in the novel upon discipleship as existential Christian involvement in the world rather than escape to the blue mountains receives its most explicit formulation in the final chapter when John Reimer explains why he has chosen to turn north at Calgary rather than to continue west. He says, "The mountains. They look so nice, I thought sitting on those hills outside Calgary, almost like a new world, sharp, beautiful, clean. But usually when you get over there's always more of what you climbed them to get away from"

(pp. 226-27). In contrast to Moses, who sent his people to the promised land, Jesus said, "I'm going to make a place ready for you and then I'll come and get you. You wait" (p. 227). For the Christian, Reimer suggests, the promised land is a future home; at present Christ's disciples are "to live the concern for others and love that Jesus showed" (p. 221).

Temptations of Big Bear confirms Wiebe's masterful ability to use symbol and metaphor to reinforce theme. The transformation of the Canadian West from its wild condition into an ordered land is effectively symbolized by the gradual transition from buffalo to train, from the land in its primal freedom to the land controlled and dominated. Initially the buffalo freely roam the prairies, although ominous signs of their depletion are evident. During what Big Bear knows is his last buffalo hunt, the realization that "the iron road crawled steadily between him and where he was born, nailing another straight line behind the Grandmother's straight police to fence him in . . ." intrudes upon his otherwise "total consuming unconscious joy of one more run merging with mus-toos-wuk given once more to the River People . . ." (p. 127). During his trial as Big Bear daydreams about buffalo, the train again destroys his enjoyment as he thinks, "but that was a train there, crawling on the prairie so far away he could see only its black line, stubby and belching" (p. 393). Finally, Big Bear has a vision of the "world . . . slit open with unending lines, squares, [and] rectangles . . ." (p. 409). The inexorable destruction of the Indian way of life is complete.

Another prominent motif that dramatically reinforces the downfall of the culture is the gradual diminishing of Big Bear's

stature among his people. Although initially he is an eminent and respected leader, he slowly loses his influence until the young warriors in his following, Little Bad Man and Wandering Spirit, begin to dictate policy. His voice no longer respected in the community councils, Big Bear becomes Lear in his rags as he walks about wearing only an old blanket. Kitty McLean says, "It was beastly how they treated him, his own son Little Bad Man sitting beside him in council and laughing when he walked through camp wearing nothing but the one blanket, so shabby now . . ." (pp. 282-83). In that Big Bear is not merely an individual but the River People, his own humiliation reflects the decline of the culture.

Although in several instances perhaps Wiebe has, as David Williamson suggests, overextended the symbolism of the sun in the novel,[14] it is most often a strikingly effective reinforcement of the Indian world view and its gradual destruction. The sun, which brings heat and life, is for the Indians part of the free world as given them by the Only One. At Fort Pitt when the Indians are still relatively unaffected by the white encroachment, they blend into the sky, water, land and sun as though they are part of these elements: "One by one, as if on parade, in single file they moved and when the lead horse with its moulded rider merged down into the trees even the seeming motion disappeared in relation to itself, in relation to the sky, the sage gleam of the river, the green land now tinged brown and gold in the September sun" (p. 15). Later, during the buffalo run, Big Bear finds completion in "the circle of sun and sky and earth and death" (p. 129). When his warriors forsake Big Bear, he nevertheless retains faith in the Indian view of life. Still

free, he appears "with the sunlight spraying around him . . . brilliantly . . ." (p. 243). At Big Bear's suggestion, Kitty McLean in her ritual warming by the sun realizes her closest identification with the Indian way of life. Though she is shivering cold, "the sun bulged over her stark in the livid sky and heat began weaving loops of warmth about her. . . . [The] Sun devoured her warmer and warmer until she was suffused. Herself; completely; open and radiant" (pp. 313-14). After the pristine freedom of the prairie has been destroyed, Big Bear knows that "Earth and Sun which had been his gifts to accept and love and leave to the others were gone, all gone" (p. 409). The symbolism of the sun, therefore, reinforces the transition from the primal wholeness of man in nature and in the Only One to brokenness.

On his trail to the Sand Hills, however, Big Bear, despite the undeniable realities of the Indians's degradation, retains a faith in the Only One and the land He has given. Before he turns into "everlasting, unchanging, rock" (p. 415) that "gives us the pipe by which we pray to The First One, for rock is the grandfather of all, the first of all being as well as the last" (pp. 314-15), Big Bear feels such happiness that he has "to turn the complete circle to see everything once more in the beautiful world that had once been given him" (p. 415). In this vibrant affirmation of life and in the symbolism of the rising sun, the novel transcends the pathetic plight of the Indians to affirm the lasting worth of the values and spirit of the Indian peoples.

Thus, sometimes Wiebe's Christian vision obtrudes in his art to weaken dialogue or undermine characterization. On the level of

craftsmanship, Wiebe especially in his early fiction displays a tendency towards lifeless dialogue, caricaturing secondary characters, and rough language. However, at his best he has the ability to convey the inner essences of diverse characters, to rise to poetic language in his prose, and to reinforce theme effectively with symbol and metaphor. As storyteller Wiebe is best when he relies on story itself to evoke the reader's response.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In his affinity for Indian, Eskimo, and rural Mennonite themes, Rudy Wiebe is a storyteller. He has "a truly admirable feel for the obscure, deep-seated drives that motivate people who have not yet made their life-experience artificial and alien by conceptualizing and intellectualizing it. He knows what really matters to most people--the simple facts of existence from birth to death--and beyond. He knows that man is not self-sufficient and that he needs to believe in a force above and beyond his control or comprehension if he is to find meaning in life."[1] The people about whom Wiebe writes retain contact with life's elemental realities--living from day to day in close proximity to the earth, to other people, and to metaphysical reality. Human experience assumes primary value in Wiebe's fiction.

His Christian, specifically Anabaptist, vision pervades his art. It informs both his criticism of people as they are, and his vision of what they might be. The best stories, Wiebe believes, not only entertain people, but also illuminate their lives. In that moral counsel is close to the center of Wiebe's artistic purpose, he is a storyteller.

Furthermore, the significance of the past in Wiebe's fiction marks him as a storyteller. On one hand, Wiebe reinterprets the "facts" of Russian Mennonite history and of Western Canadian history

from his Christian perspective. In this sense he is an historian, an interpreter of historical events. But, more fundamentally, Wiebe in his historical fiction explores the nature of human experience. Except for differing historical contexts, people in the past were much as they are today. Wiebe himself says that "in one sense historical novels are not really historical at all. You could call The Blue Mountains of China a historical novel, but it's about people struggling with exactly the kinds of things that we struggle with, except for a slight shift in time and place. But that surely is all that fiction ever does anyway. How many human themes are there: love, war, what? . . . Consciously building a story is my way of trying to get at those big, big questions" ("Stream," pp. 159-60).

In his craftsmanship, Wiebe is developing into a consummate artist. If in his early fiction his dialogue and characterization at times suffer from didacticism, Wiebe nevertheless has the ability to evoke the inner nuances of his central characters's minds. And in his effective use of metaphor and symbol, Wiebe emerges as a gifted storyteller.

NOTES

Chapter I

[1] Stet, 4 (February 1956), 9-12.

[2] Foolscap, 5 (Spring 1966), [3].

[3] Foolscap, 5 (Spring 1966), [3].

[4] Foolscap, 5 (Spring 1966), [40-41].

[5] First published as Part Two, Chapter 4 of First and Vital Candle (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), pp. 67-84. Subsequently published as a short story in The Story-Makers, ed. Rudy Wiebe (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 275-92.

[6] First published as a short story in Christian Living, 14, No. 9 (September 1967), 20-23; in The Mennonite, 82, No. 30 (August 15, 1967), 502-05; in The Mennonite Brethren Herald, 6, No. 33 (October 6, 1967), 4-6; in Pluck, 1, No. 2 (Spring 1968), 31-36; and--in German translation--"Der Brunnen," trans. Ingrid Janzen, in Der Bote, 44, No. 32 (August 15, 1967), 11-12; 44, No. 33 (August 22, 1967), 11. Subsequently published as Chapter 7 of The Blue Mountains of China (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), pp. 96-104.

[7] First published as a short story in Journal of Canadian Fiction, 2, No. 2 (Spring 1973), 39-41. Subsequently published as Part Two, Chapter 5 of The Temptations of Big Bear (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), pp. 123-32.

[8] Christian Living, 11, No. 12 (December 1964), 10-11, 31-32.

[9] Fiddlehead, No. 84 (March-April 1970), 40-52, and Stories

From Western Canada, ed. Rudy Wiebe (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 176-92.

[10] Fourteen Stories High, ed. David Helwig and Tom Marshall (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1971), pp. 112-21, and the narrative voice: Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto / Montreal: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1972), pp. 249-56.

[11] Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962; [in U.S.A.] Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962; and New Canadian Library, No. 82, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972.

[12] Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966; and [in U.S.A.] Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966.

[13] Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970; and [in U.S.A.] Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970.

[14] Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973.

[15] Mennonite Life, 20, No. 4 (October 1965), 172-76.

[16] No. 88 (Winter 1971), 98-102.

[17] "A personal Christianity," Saturday Night, 86, No. 4 (April 1971), 26-28.

[18] Peace Shall Destroy Many, New Canadian Library, No. 82, pp. 1-6.

[19] Pp. 242-48.

[20] Journal of Canadian Fiction, 2, No. 4 (Fall 1973), 71-76.

[21] Conversations with Canadian Novelists, Part Two (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 149-60.

[22] For example, Pat Barclay, "One of Year's Best Novels," Victoria Times (November 3, 1973), 22; Candace Savage, "Wiebe's Canadian myth: inevitable present, melancholy future," "Accent,"

Saskatoon Star-Phoenix (November 2, 1973), 24; and Stephen Scobie, "A wise Indian's reservations," Macleans, 86, No. 11 (November 1973), 116, 118.

23 "A Sense of the Past," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 2, No. 4 (Fall 1973), 88-91.

24 "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). Subsequent references to "Storyteller" will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after each quotation.

25 Articulating West: Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature (Toronto: New Press, 1972), p. xxi.

Chapter II

1 "More story tellers are needed," Mennonite Reporter, 3, No. 4 (February 19, 1973), 10.

2 "Introduction," Story-Makers, p. x.

3 "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo," Canadian Literature, No. 52 (Spring 1972), 57.

4 Rudy Wiebe, "An Unpublished Interview by Donald Cameron" (Edmonton, 1972), p. 1. Cameron does not include this section of the unpublished transcript of the taped interview in the condensed final version--"Rudy Wiebe: the Moving Stream Is Perfectly at Rest." Subsequent references to the unpublished transcript will be entitled "Cameron Interview," and will be indicated in parentheses after each quotation.

5 Rudy Wiebe, "Translating life into art: A conversation with Rudy Wiebe," An Interview by Margaret Reimer and Sue Steiner, Mennonite

Reporter, 3, No. 23 (November 26, 1973), Section A, 8.

6 White Pelican, 1, No. 4 (Fall 1971), 33-37.

7 Prism international, 12, No. 3 (Spring 1973), 47-56.

8 "Rudy Wiebe's 'Steel Lines of fiction': The Progress of a Mennonite Novelist," Mennonite Mirror, 1, No. 1 (September 1971), 28-29.

9 Liberty, 33, No. 7 (September 1956), 22, 64, 66.

10 New Voices: Canadian University Writing of 1956, ed. Earle Birney et al. (Toronto / Vancouver: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1956), pp. 128-33.

11 Rudy Wiebe, "The Western Canadian Imagination: an Interview with Rudy Wiebe," An Unpublished Interview by George Melnyk (Edmonton, September 25, 1972), p. 7.

12 Trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series XLVI (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1954), pp. 3-4.

13 Elmer F. Suderman, "The Mennonite Character in American Fiction," Mennonite Life, 22, No. 3 (July 1967), 128.

14 How D. Spettigue can read Abe's final position as "a troubled skepticism rather than conversion" is inexplicable. See his review of Candle, Queen's Quarterly, 73, No. 4 (Winter 1966), 608.

15 "Quick, Name 55 New Canadian Writers . . . Dennis Can," Macleans, 84, No. 7 (July 1971), 72.

16 "A wise Indian's reservations," 118.

17 the narrative voice, p. 257. Subsequent references to "Passage by Land" will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after each quotation.

Chapter III

1 (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1946), p. 137.

2 The Doctrines of the Mennonites (Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950), p. 60.

3 "The Artist as Witness To and Critic of Society," The Journal of Church and Society, 1, No. 2 (Fall 1965), 49-50.

4 "Religion and Literature," Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1966 [1951]), p. 392.

5 First published in Tamarack Review, No. 44 (Summer 1967), 56-64. Subsequently published in the narrative voice, pp. 242-48.

6 Katie Funk Wiebe in an otherwise perceptive review describes Big Bear as a pacifist. See "The Temptations of Big Bear: A review of Rudy Wiebe's new novel," The Mennonite, 89, No. 10 (March 5, 1974), 154-55.

7 "A wise Indian's reservations," 118.

8 "Contemporary Scientific Mythology," Metaphysical Beliefs: Three Essays, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1957), pp. 15-16.

9 The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 117-18.

10 Leslie H. Stobbe, "Anabaptist Distinctives," Mennonite Brethren Herald, 1, No. 45 (November 30, 1962), 6-7.

11 Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 69.

12 The Ministry: Men and Media, A Special Section of Mennonite Brethren Herald, 10, No. 2 (January 22, 1971), 25.

13 Rudy Wiebe, "All On Their Knees," The Mennonite, 83, No. 46

(December 17, 1968), 783.

14 "A Mighty Inner River," 72.

15 Both John and Reimer are common Russian Mennonite names; Nabachler consists of the suffixes of three large Russian Mennonite communities in Manitoba: Altona, Steinbach, and Winkler.

Chapter IV

1 Rudy Wiebe, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" Fourteen Stories High, ed. Helwig and Marshall, p. 119. Subsequent references to "Voice" will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after each quotation.

2 For Conscience Sake: A Study of Mennonite Migrations Resulting From the World War, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, No. 4 (Goshen: Mennonite Historical Society, 1940), p. 234.

3 For Conscience Sake, p. 234.

4 Because the italicized portion of the verse--bread, will give him a stone--is absent from many important ancient Lucan manuscripts, the Revised Standard Version places it in a footnote as a variant reading.

5 "Let My People Go: Rudy Wiebe's The Blue Mountains of China," Canadian Mennonite, 18, No. 47 (December 4, 1970), 11.

6 Wilderness and Paradise, p. 5.

7 "A Conversation with Allan Dueck about Temptations of Big Bear" (Edmonton, June 23, 1973).

8 See, for example, John Muggeridge, "The last of the new Mohicans is a radical in buckskin," Toronto Star (November 17, 1973), F7.

9 See, for example, P. H. Gordon, "The stamp of treason,"

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10 Massey Lectures, Ninth Series (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969), p. 4.

11 Articulating West, p. xxi.

12 The Historical Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p. 70.

13 "review: The Blue Mountains of China," Christian Living, 18, No. 7 (July 1971), 32.

14 "Rudy Wiebe--The Blue Mountains . . .," a forum for exploration, dialogue, and information published by and for Mennonites in the university (April 1971), 4.

15 The Historical Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1924), p. 42.

16 Historical Novel, p. 29.

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1 The Failure of Theology in Modern Literature (New York / Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1963), p. 220.

2 Canadian Literature, No. 51 (Winter 1972), 71.

3 "My Pilgrimage in Art," A Forum Talk at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (Elkhart, Indiana, October 26, 1971), p. 6.

4 Review of Blue Mountains, Fiddlehead, No. 88 (Winter 1971), 98.

5 F. W. Watt, "Fiction," University of Toronto Quarterly, 32, No. 4 (July 1963), 400.

6 "Let My People Go," 7.

7 "First and Vital Candle: Wiebe Answers His Critics," Canadian

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8 "The Rehabilitation of Big Bear: Another Rudy Wiebe novel," Mennonite Reporter, 3, No. 23 (November 26, 1973), Section A, 8.

9 Helga Harder, "Wiebe Answers His Critics," 6.

10 "An Examination of the Journey-to-water Motif in the Canadian Prairie Novel," M.A. Thesis in English at the University of Alberta (Edmonton, Spring 1970), pp. 41-42.

11 The original version reads: "Just a thing, the shadow of a thing. Following me ever since." See "Black Vulture," The Mennonite, 82, No. 25 (June 20, 1967), 415. The final version reads: "Just a thing; not even, the shadow of a thing. Soaking it up, following us. Ever since." See Blue Mountains, p. 71.

12 Katie Funk Wiebe, "Mennonites in an artist's eye," The Mennonite, 82, No. 32 (September 5, 1967), 530.

13 "My Life: That's As It Was," Canadian Mennonite, 6, No. 25 (June 20, 1967), 6.

14 "A 'sure-fire' miss," "New Leisure," Winnipeg Free Press (September 29, 1973), 13.

Chapter VI

1 Reimer, "Wiebe's 'Steel Lines of fiction,'" 28-29.

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